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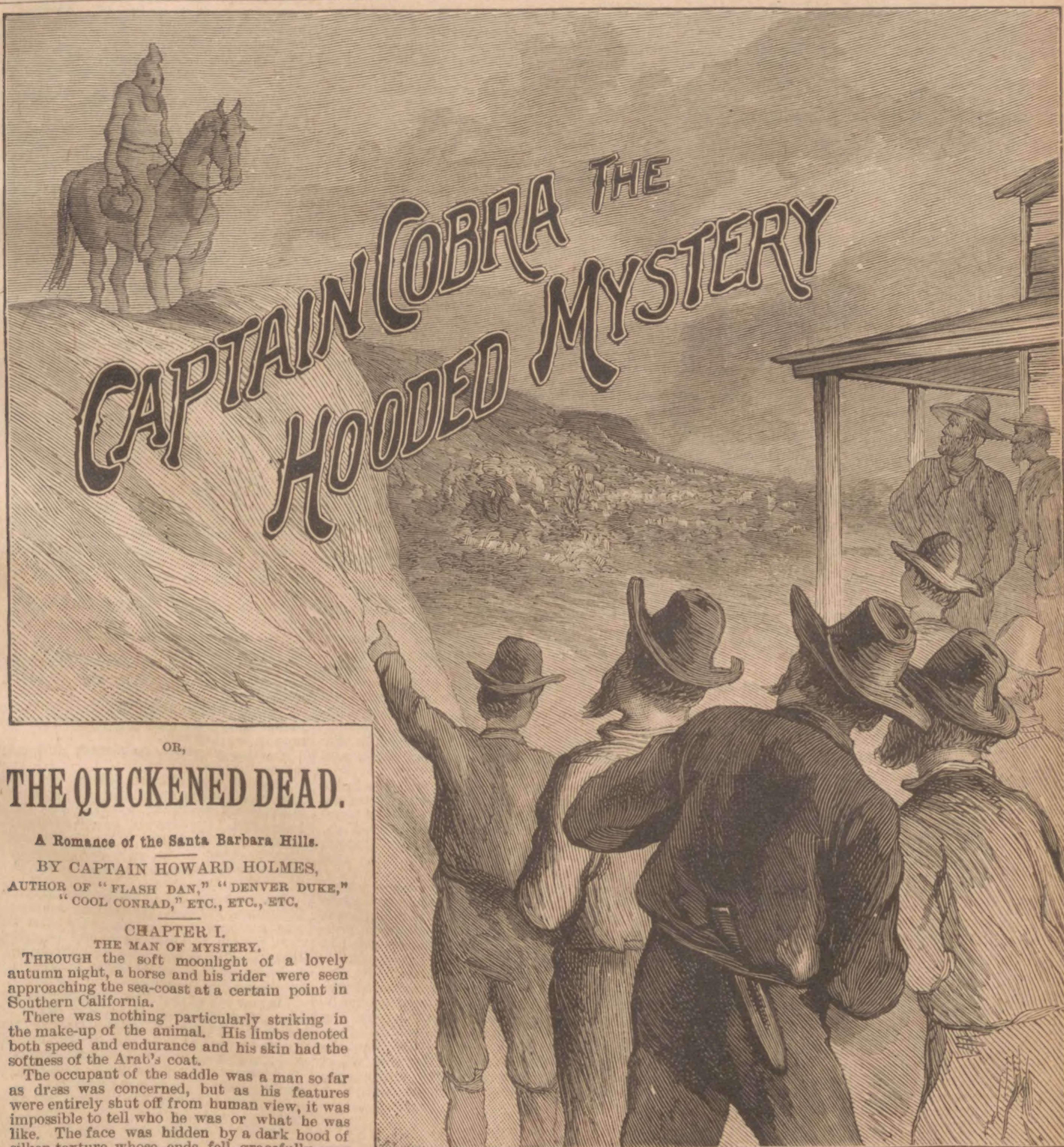
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OR,
THE QUICKENED DEAD.

A Romance of the Santa Barbara Hills.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "FLASH DAN," "DENVER DUKE,"
"COOL CONRAD," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN OF MYSTERY.

THROUGH the soft moonlight of a lovely autumn night, a horse and his rider were seen approaching the sea-coast at a certain point in Southern California.

There was nothing particularly striking in the make-up of the animal. His limbs denoted both speed and endurance and his skin had the softness of the Arab's coat.

The occupant of the saddle was a man so far as dress was concerned, but as his features were entirely shut off from human view, it was impossible to tell who he was or what he was like. The face was hidden by a dark hood of silken texture whose ends fell gracefully over the shoulders, but not far enough to interfere with the movements of his arms.

THERE WAS NO MISTAKING THE IDENTITY OF THE PERSON THUS SEEN. CAPTAIN COBRA, THE HOODED MYSTERY, WAS IN PLAIN VIEW.

He wore above the hood a wide-brimmed hat of the sort seen everywhere in the Southwest and across the border. His dress consisted of an open jacket with a display of silver braid at the front, and close-fitting pantaloons the ends of which were lost in the ample tops of high boots the heels of which were adorned with silver spurs.

The lines were grasped lightly by ungloved hands as if they were ready to leap to the six-shooters in the rider's belt at the shortest notice.

This person rode forward with head erect, seeing everything visible with a pair of bright black eyes that sparkled behind the hood.

The coast was not far away, and in a short time the mysterious rider drew rein on a little piece of elevated table-land and looked at the moonlight on the sea.

The leaping, laughing waters were far below him. He saw the silvery reflection of the great round disk and seemed to watch it with a good deal of interest.

All the time he was regarded by three men who had followed him for more than two miles.

They were dressed like miners but carried repeating-rifles like hunters and their actions told that they did not look upon the solitary horseman with any friendship.

"Lor! what a shot," exclaimed one of the three, a big, red-bearded fellow who cocked his Winchester while he spoke. "He can't be more'n fifty yards away and I can tumble him outen the saddle without difficulty. The only way we'll ever get to see his face is by dropping him on the sly."

"You don't want to do anything of the kind," was the answer, and the speaker was a more intelligent and better looking man than the person with the cocked rifle. "Captain Cobra has come to the coast for a purpose, and it is our duty to see his adventure out—not to kill him."

"Mebbe so, but, by Jehosaphat, it's a terrible temptation."

"But one we've got to let pass."

The third man of the three watchers said nothing.

He was the most striking member of the little party as well as the youngest.

In years he could not have been past twenty-two, but his features showed even in the moonlight that he had seen hard service above and underground.

A more thorough miner for his age the Santa Barbara country had never known than this young man. He had come into the region three years prior to the opening of our story, and by shrewdness and tireless industry had founded a flourishing mining-town called Santa Leo, besides developing some of the most prosperous mines of Southern California.

Like most of the inhabitants of the gold and silver El Dorados, he had a history which he never talked about, and the curious had guessed at it in vain. Sam Shott—such was his name—stood six feet in his mining boots; he had the figure of an athlete, the face of an Apollo and the activity of a practiced wrestler.

He was the youngest mine-king of the coast, and his word in Santa Leo was law.

Although leader of the three who had followed Captain Cobra, the hooded rider, to the coast, he had not spoken against his companion's expressed desire to shoot the man from the saddle.

A smile—one of half-approval—played with his lips when he saw the red-bearded man raise his rifle to his shoulder, and something like a frown chased the smile away when the second man checked the movement.

Shott leaned against a young tree and watched Captain Cobra with unabated interest.

The night was clear, and the moon being at its full revealed every object within an ample space plainly visible.

Captain Cobra sat bolt upright in the saddle with his eyes riveted on the sea below. He did not attempt to lift his hood to let the bracing sea air play upon his cheeks, and if Shott and his companions expected him to do anything of this kind they were disappointed.

"Go back to Santa Leo," suddenly said Shott to his companions.

The men looked amazed.

"I spoke expecting to be obeyed," continued the young mine-king somewhat sternly. "You know the way back; you don't want a guide."

"Come, Basil; it's his orders," said the man with the red beard. "We never ask 'why,' you know. But, by Jupiter! I would like to drop Captain Cobra for what he has done."

"What has he done?" questioned Shott.

The abruptness of the question startled Basil Braddock.

"You can place anything you please to his credit," replied he. "Anything, Captain Sam, from murder down. No honest man rides about with his face concealed like that man. Look how he serves notice on claim-holders. It is death for any one to disregard the bowie-pierced warning signed 'Captain Cobra.' More than one poor devil of a miner has been found in his shanty with a bowie in his heart. And yonder sits the scourge who does it all."

Shott looked over Braddock's outstretched

arm and saw the Mystery and his horse as motionless as before.

"Some o' these times he'll post one o' his notices in Santa Leo," continued Braddock. "My only wonder is that he hasn't done so before this. What if we wake up some morning and find the pierced paper above the door of the Wounded Rattlesnake, or pinned to your own shanty?"

Sam Shott smiled derisively.

"What! don't you think he'll do it?" the miner went on with a sneer. "That man yonder fears neither God nor the devil, and as for man—ha, ha! his deeds show what he thinks of us."

The young chief of Santa Leo did not reply to this save to throw a rapid look along the trail which they had traversed to the spot where they had halted, and Braddock interpreting the look as a silent command for a return, touched his nearest companion's arm.

"Come, Mark. Captain Sam wants to be alone here, and it's not our business to ask why."

The next moment two figures gliding away among the shadows of rock and tree left Sam Shott the only occupant of the spot.

The young mine-king watched his friends for awhile and then turned his attention to Captain Cobra.

"My God! his face is actually uncovered!" he exclaimed at once becoming excited. "Am I to get a glimpse of the hidden features of the terror of the coast range? I would give my mines for one look, and, if I mistake not, now is my time."

With his eyes fixed on the man in the saddle, Sam Shott ran down the bridle-path before him toward the place from which Captain Cobra overlooked the sea. His eyes had an eagerness they had not had for many days, his face was flushed, and his heart, if excitement had not stilled it, beat faster than it had ever beaten before.

The mine-owner hoped to reach a certain spot almost directly beneath Captain Cobra's position from which he could obtain an uninterrupted view of the mysterious face. He knew the country perfectly from that very spot; he had often overlooked the sea himself and knew that he could approach to within a few feet of the horseman without being discovered.

Shott proceeded with swiftness and caution.

Trailing his rifle he got along with ease, every now and then glancing up to see Captain Cobra still on the rock, his hat in his hand and the folds of the hood thrown back upon his forehead.

Never before had any one had such an opportunity to pry into one of the darkest secrets of the Golden State. The man of mystery—the author of the bowie-pierced warning found at the mouth of mines and upon scores of cabin doors—was as unknown to the men of California as the Man in the Iron Mask.

Sam Shott had become interested in Captain Cobra. He had seen him on more than one previous occasion riding solitary and alone through the mountains hooded to the chin, with no part of his skin visible but his hands, which looked deadly in their silkiness, and which seemed strong enough to break a man's vertebra at a single twist.

At last Shott came to a bend in the trail which, for a few moments, would hide Captain Cobra from view.

He would have to crawl some yards under a heavy ledge of almost solid rock, but the crawl would bring him to within a few feet of the hooded chief and he would have a splendid view of the dreaded face of the mountain scourge.

Shott crept toward his goal with burning eagerness. He made no noise as he proceeded, and at length reached the place aimed at.

The spy knew that the rock occupied by Captain Cobra was almost directly above him.

He had only to crawl out from beneath the projecting boulders of the natural ledge and look up into the hooded face.

Slowly he crept forward, his heart in his throat and his eyes blazing with unchecked eagerness, and at last reached a rock, around which he twisted his agile body and looked up.

The moon was shining with the same force as ever, and the wedded figures of the horse and his rider were startlingly visible.

But, a cry which he could not suppress parted Shott's lips. It seemed to throw him from the shadow of the rock, and the next instant he was staring at the dark hood of the California mystery and not looking up into the face which had been kept so well from the gaze of mankind.

But Shott had seen enough to startle him.

His cry had caused the hood to drop back over Captain Cobra's face, but he had seen enough!

The following moment the rock above him was deserted, and when Shott stepped out from the shadows he saw, disappearing down the lofty trail, the hooded figure of the man whom he was destined to meet again and again in one of the most exciting dramas ever enacted in that wild region.

CHAPTER II.

THE CARQUINEZ CAT.

AT about the same hour that witnessed Sam Shott's adventure among the mountains above

the coast, a young girl, with a face of exceeding beauty and a graceful figure, entered a rough, frame house, in the heart of a typical California mining-town, and surprised a woman who, though past fifty, had vivacious black eyes and almost rosy cheeks.

"Mother," said the girl whose face was pale, "they are quarreling again."

The woman smiled.

"Showing their teeth as usual, are they, Dolores?" she laughed. "You must recollect, child, that Santa Leo after all is nothing more than a den of wolves. But who are at it now?"

"I did not see much of the fracas. The doors of the Cold Deck were open as I passed, and I saw knives and revolvers drawn."

"A fight over a game, doubtless. The sooner the pack destroys itself the better, perhaps."

There was a vein of hatred in the speaker's tone, but, at the same time, she seemed to be deeply interested in the quarrel reported by her beautiful daughter.

"What did you see, Dolores?" she questioned. "Was it ten to one at the Cold Deck? If the Serpents were there you may be sure they had picked out a victim."

"They were there, or, at least some of them were," quickly answered Dolores. "I saw the broad shoulders and the big beard of the Red Cardinal. Just beyond him stood the Yuba Bandit, his long fingers wound about the butt of a revolver, and on his left Black Benito held his knife along his sleeve. Such was but a part of the scene which I saw under the lamps of the Cold Deck. The other members of the gang could not have been far off. As usual, they faced one man."

"Who was he?"

"Don Caddo, the Carquinez Cat."

The face of the listener seemed to change color.

"Was he facing the Serpents, Dolores? Were they between him and the door?"

"His back was partly turned toward me and the way to the door was clear or nearly so. Don Caddo did not seem to fear the men in his front. His laced hat was set back on his forehead, and his embroidered jacket open. I could not help noticing, mother, how its silver trimmings caught and glistened in the light. In all my life I never saw Don Caddo look so handsome, but, in spite of his coolness, I feared for him. The Red Cardinal heaped all manner of abuse upon him, but he did not leap forward. Instead, he seemed to keep his temper though his hand rested on the hilt of that terrible knife of his, and I looked every moment to see it spring from its sheath."

"Well, how did the quarrel terminate?"

"You forget that I saw but part of it—the tableau, I might say. The Serpents of Santa Leo found their match in Don Caddo—I am sure they did."

Dolores spoke with growing enthusiasm. Her dark eyes brightened, her cheeks caught a deeper red—as if she were in love with the man whom she had seen defy the banded gamblers of the camp.

"I am anxious," said the elder woman. "They are not quarreling yet. Something has happened before this? Either Don Caddo has used his knife and escaped, or the Serpents have him in their coils. I must know what has happened."

The mother went to the door and opened it.

"The Plaza is deserted," said she, looking out.

"Are the doors of the Cold Deck open?"

"Yes."

"No signs of a tumult there?"

"None that I see."

The next moment the woman gave vent to a sharp cry and fell back, her face becoming pale in the light.

"What is it, mother?" cried Dolores, rushing forward, but only to stop short and stare at the man in the doorway.

He was a person to attract attention anywhere.

He stood more than six feet in his stockings. His frame was as massive as a giant's, supplied with broad shoulders, a well-poised head and long arms. His hair and beard were red—fiery red almost. The latter covered his face from chin to eyes; it fell over his chest in silken waves which fairly shone in the lamplight that flooded the little room.

This man was one of the unread characters of California. Despite his unshorn appearance, it was rumored that he had once taken holy orders, but that some crime had banished him from the church which he had dishonored, and he had gone back to the world to become a desperado among the mines.

He was called the Red Cardinal, partly from the rumor just mentioned, and partly on account of his striking beard. He had come to Santa Leo some time prior to the date of our story, and had gathered around him a lot of desperate characters known in camp by the collective name of the Silver Serpents.

Dolores and her mother stared for some moments at the apparition in the doorway.

The Red Cardinal smiled as he noticed their fright, and, instead of withdrawing, he came forward and deliberately took a chair.

"Shut the door!" commanded Dolores's

mother, as she approached the giant and touched him on the shoulder.

"Well, what is it?" she demanded.

The red rough threw a swift look toward Dolores.

"Don't you think the time has come?" he asked. "How long must a man wait on you?"

The mother said nothing, but met his look with an eye that did not shrink.

"No time was set for my answer," she replied.

"But, now that you have come and Dolores is here, it can be settled once for all."

"That is true," responded the man, showing his teeth in a grin. "Of course you have mentioned the matter to Dolores—"

"I have told her nothing."

"It was no secret."

"Perhaps not, but I did not see fit to darken my child's life with a shadow of that kind."

The red rough looked at Dolores again, who had now moved nearer and seemed eager to speak.

"Settle it, then," continued the man, running one of his hands through his beard and spreading it out over his breast. "As you say, Dolores is here, and she's old enough to speak for herself."

Dolores took another step toward him.

"What is it?" she demanded. "If your mission here concerns me, speak out!"

"By Jove, you're plain! I like that," smiled he. "I have asked your mother for your hand."

Dolores seemed to shrink, but only for an instant.

"I will answer," she replied, looking at her mother. "As you say, I am no longer a child. I have reached and passed that age when one becomes her own mistress; but I have not yet thought of a husband. I have plenty of time for that yet, and having no desire to marry now I must decline all offers, no difference from whom they come."

The lips of the Red Cardinal compressed. The smile vanished, and he turned the battery of his eyes upon the mother.

"Do you approve? You have heard your daughter. She rejects the hand I have offered through you. She insults, under cover of the coolest possible language, Thor Rutherford, the man whom you cannot afford to treat lightly."

"My mother cannot speak for me," exclaimed Dolores. "I am my own mistress, as I have said."

The Cardinal did not seem to pay the slightest attention to the remark.

"I ask for your reply," he said to the mother, who confronted him without a semblance of color in her face. "If you approve of your child's answer, I want to know it."

He left the chair, and his gigantic figure towered in the light.

Madam Marcia—as the mother of Dolores was sometimes called—made no reply.

"Speak!" exclaimed the red rough. "If you defy the man before you, say it in words, so that he will know what to do. Say that you will not give me the girl, and then take what comes."

This implied threat amused the girl.

"I will speak for her!" she cried. "If you hold a club over her head, let it fall on mine. No one but a camp coward insults a woman. I have seen enough of the Red Cardinal and his gang to despise every one. But, to-night, you were ten to one against the man from Carquinez; but in him you found a foe who faced you like a lion. The door is yonder! I would not become your wife at the entreaty of my mother, and Heaven knows I'd go through fire for her!"

The look of the red rough was almost literally that of a fiend incarnate. He seemed about to throw himself upon the defiant Dolores, but, instead, he stepped back and burst into a stinging laugh.

"You'll have an opportunity to prove your singular devotion," he said. "You woman knows me, and, what is more, I know her! Why, I can make her a hunted outcast—more hated than Captain Cobra, the Hooded Mystery of the hills that hem us in. I can turn your love for her into the deepest hatred—making you curse her from the very depths of your soul. Look at her! Her very face confirms my words. She knows that, though I lie at times, every word I utter now is an arrow of truth. I am more than the Red Cardinal of Santa Leo. Madam Marcia knows that. Madam Marcia! ha, ha, ha!"

The red rough took a step toward the door just as a cry sounded behind Dolores.

The girl felt something sink to the floor ere the cry died away, but at that moment the door flew open, and the figure which appeared there drew an exclamation from her:

"Don Caddo!"

The Red Rough saw the new-comer at the same instant.

Quick as a flash his left hand moved toward his hip; but, the man who cleared the space between him and the door was swifter, and, the next instant, the rough was crowded to the wall with ten fingers under the red beard, and the eyes of the Carquinez Cat were flashing in his face!

CHAPTER III.

WEAVING THE WEB.

THE full strength of the Red Cardinal was called into play by the power and impetuosity of the attack.

With her mother in a swoon at her feet, Dolores stared in breathless suspense at the two men struggling for the mastery at the wall, though it was evident that Don Caddo had the advantage and was holding his ground.

Rutherford tried to tear the claws of the Cat from his throat, but at length turned an imploring look upon Dolores, at which she sprang forward and touched Don Caddo's arm.

The man from Carquinez turned toward her, but did not relax that terrible grip.

"Don't choke him to death," pleaded the girl. "Do you say so?" queried Don Caddo, with a look of surprise.

"I do."

"After his words to your mother?—after all his devilish threats?"

"Yes."

"By Jupiter! I hate to let the wolf go. I was just showing him what the Carquinez claws can do, but he has an idea of their powers. Tell me again to let him go, Dolores."

The girl smiled.

"Yes, let him go," said she.

The hands of Don Caddo were withdrawn and the half-choked rough took new breath.

He was nearly black in the face, his limbs were weak under him, and his first step forward was a stagger. He tottered to the door, flung it wide, and tramped out, grinding his teeth until those behind him heard the sound.

"Your mother, first," began Don Caddo, lifting the body of Madam Marcia and carrying it to a couch at one side of the room, followed by Dolores, anxious and pale. "If it is but a swoon you can take care of her."

"It is nothing more," was the response. "The red rough threatened her with the malice of the true scoundrel. It was more than she could stand."

Dolores bent over the couch, and Don Caddo saw the lips of mother and daughter meet in the lamplight.

"I'm going," said he, when the girl arose. "It is now open war between me and the Silver Serpents of Santa Leo. They had me cornered for a while at the Cold Deck, but they didn't rush upon the Cat's claws."

"What was the trouble?"

"They made the turn of a card the pretext," replied Don Caddo. "But, trouble has been brewing for some time. The Cardinal wants me out of the way. He is backed by the Serpents. You saw his look as he walked from the house?"

"It was a challenge."

"He shan't find it unaccepted," exclaimed Don Caddo. "I hate—despise the whole gang. The Cardinal wants my mine. Twice within a week I have found strange footprints in the private chambers. I have measured them and compared them with tracks found in the dust of Santa Leo. If you had not interfered I would have finished the villain under this very roof."

Don Caddo looked toward the unconscious occupant of the cot.

"I heard what he said," he went on. "I could not help it; but I swear to you, Dolores, that I was not playing spy. He pretends to know something about Madam Marcia."

"He does. Whether he knows or not, his words were enough to throw her into a swoon."

"What do you know?"

The man from Carquinez stood before Dolores with folded arms, and was looking her squarely in the face.

"If you have a secret, don't let me rob you," he went on, interpreting the girl's silence as hesitation. "I'm no secret-hunter—not in that direction," he added, quickly. "I haven't known your mother long. When I came to Santa Leo she was here, Madam Marcia then, as now. Sam Shott, the richest man among the mines, gave her tips and enabled her to put aside something for a rainy day. She has always treated me well, though something—I know not what—seems to stand between us. Madam Marcia never took me into her confidence. She may have told you—"

"What should she tell me?" interrupted Dolores. "My mother is my best friend. I have heard her say that if she could blot out one or two thoughts she would be supremely happy."

"Then she must have a secret."

There was no answer.

"Don't let me go too far," continued Don Caddo. "Stop me when you think I have gone far enough."

"Let us stop now."

A faint smile appeared under the black mustache of the Carquinez Cat.

The next instant he held out a dark-brown hand, the tips of whose fingers Dolores more than merely touched.

The eyes of the young couple met.

"Are you going to hunt the Cardinal?" asked the girl.

"I don't intend to shun him."

"He will hunt you."

"If that be true, he will find the Cat from Carquinez!"

Then he was gone.

Dolores went back to her mother and restored her to consciousness.

She thought of the hot meeting between Don Caddo and the Serpent, and wondered if there would not be a tigerish man-hunt in Santa Leo before morning.

Meantime the Red Cardinal, with the sorest throat he had ever had, had proceeded to one of the most substantial houses in camp. He had sought this place instead of the gambling den where he knew he would find the members of the desperate band headed by himself.

Passing into a small and plainly furnished room, he unlocked a heavy chest-like piece of furniture in one corner and took out several packages, the outer coverings of which were buckskin.

"I'll call Caliban first," said the Cardinal, going to the door and calling in a loud voice the name he had just pronounced.

He went back to the table upon which he had deposited the packages, but had not seated himself ere a footstep was heard, and a little man with a keen eye—he had but one—and a grizzled beard of snowy whiteness entered the room.

He touched his forehead by way of salute when he met the Cardinal's look, and, in a moment, had taken possession of a chair on the opposite side of the table.

"How is your memory, Caliban?" asked Rutherford, accompanying the query with a grin.

"It's the best slave I ever had," was the answer.

Without more ado the deft fingers of the red giant opened one of the little packages—there were three of them—and placed before Caliban's eyes the handle of a stiletto.

"Ha! where is the blade? In the heart of Colonel Midas?" laughed the man across the table.

The red rough gave him a look of intense satisfaction.

"Your memory is excellent, sure enough," he said. "So this is the handle of the dagger that killed Colonel Midas?"

"It is."

Rutherford took up the second package, and opening it as he had the first, revealed a ring, the seal of which was a serpent's head in gold, with glittering eyes of rubies.

"Ha! relic number two!" laughed Caliban. "That ring, a few years ago, was the best known signet in California. The man who wore it was as famous as the ring itself; but he doesn't wear it now, eh, Red Beard?"

"He has no use for rings," answered Rutherford, taking up the third and last package.

If he had glanced across the table while he undid the buckskin, he would have seen an unnatural glitter in the eyes of his companion.

Caliban's hands—dark, skeleton hands they were—rested on the edge of the table, and his chin set upon them showed his master nothing but his head which was enormous and out of proportion when compared with the rest of his body.

The contents of the last package seemed to be smaller than those of the others, and when the red rough had removed the last fold of buckskin, there rolled half-way across the board a small button that resembled one part of a severed silver sphere.

"Ho! the button of the laced coat!" promptly laughed Caliban, and all at once his hands gathered the three objects together and he laughed again.

"These would stretch his neck—ay, till the joints cracked!" he went on. "The button, the hilt and the ring! The blade was found in Colonel Midas's breast, the ring was stolen from his hand, and the button was lost from the laced coat of the murderer."

"Just so, Caliban, said Rutherford. "Now tell me what you discovered in the Lost Angel?"

Caliban took a long breath.

"I went further than ever before," he replied. "I crawled along the ledge in the dark and twice hung by the ends of my fingers. I threw my rope across the chasm, caught it on the rock and gained the other bank. Beyond it I found a hole in the wall. I crept in like a snake and then tried my matches."

"Well?"

"I found myself in his private treasury. You don't know how rich the Carquinez Cat is, Red Beard."

"We don't care about his riches, Caliban," smiled the Cardinal with a toss of his head. "I want to know what you found in the mine. You know what I mean."

The big-headed man thrust one hand into his bosom and threw an old-fashioned buckskin purse upon the table.

"Nothing but this?" exclaimed Rutherford with a disappointed air.

"Open it."

The red rough did so, holding it bottom up and shaking it a little.

"A little harder. It is there," grinned Caliban.

The next moment there fell out of the purse a silver button precisely like the one just taken from the package.

"Look! It rolls toward its mate," chuckled

Caliban pointing at the button which, strange to say, had rolled to the other one.

The eyes of Rutherford were agleam with triumph.

"That is enough," he exclaimed. "I now possess proof sufficient."

"That may be, but if we had the missing blade so as to fit it to the hilt—"

"We don't need it, Caliban!" broke in the Cardinal. "Now I'll show him that the hatred of the Silver Serpent never sleeps. He sunk his fingers into my throat a while ago. By the gods! I will strangle the Cat with a silver button!" And the bearded Titan smote the table until the two well-watched buttons danced.

CHAPTER IV.

MADAM MARCIA'S FLIGHT.

SUCH was the prevailing state of affairs in Santa Leo when Sam Shott, the young bonanza-owner, returned from his adventure with Captain Cobra, the mysterious horseman.

The first man to accost him after entering the camp was Basil Braddock, one of the men who were with him at the time of his discovery of the hooded rider.

Basil was a rough and impetuous Arizona importation, whose greatest fault was his eagerness to precipitate matters when slower action would prove discretion.

Shott found himself face to face with Basil soon after entering camp.

"What did you see?" queried Braddock. "Did Captain Cobra accommodate you with a view of his face?"

Shott smiled.

"Did you think he would do so, Basil?" he asked. "You know how often Captain Cobra has been waylaid and watched by the curious."

"Yes."

"Well, what have they got for their pains?"

"Nothing. They've seen only the accursed hood. The rascal never unmasks. The only way to get a peep at his face is to stop him with a bullet from a Winchester and then remove the hood yourself."

"That is the best way," answered Shott who had resolved to keep his discovery to himself.

"How is the camp, Basil?"

"They had the Cat cornered awhile ago," replied Braddock.

"Who had?"

"The Serpents."

"Where did it take place?"

"At the Cold Deck."

"Did any blood flow?"

"Not a drop, though it wasn't his fault that it did not. I never saw the Cat so eager for a tussle. Afraid? There ain't a drop of coward blood in his veins! He faced more than one-half of the band with the Cardinal at their head, and gave them word for word and flash for flash. All the time he kept his hand on the hilt of his knife, and a step forward by the crowd would have opened the bloodiest picnic Santa Leo has ever seen. I wanted him to push Don Caddo a little further, but he walked out with the devil in his eye."

Sam Shott listened to this brief account of the saloon altercation with a good deal of interest.

As there seemed nothing to be added, he proceeded down the street to be followed by Basil and stopped again.

"What is it, Basil?"

"Don't you think he's coming a little too close?" asked Braddock, a look of eagerness and curiosity in his eye.

Shott looked puzzled.

"Who is coming too close?" he exclaimed.

"Don Caddo."

"Too close to whom, Basil—to me?"

Braddock affected to laugh his surprise, for he drew off and looked at the mine-king.

"Mebbe I'm mistaken," said he. "But, I thought you were the friend of Dolores."

"I am. The girl has no more devoted friend than Sam Shott; but, I don't interfere in anything that does not interest me."

The expression that overspread Braddock's face was ludicrous.

"I'm going to be plain," he added. "Don Caddo is trying to throw a net over the girl."

"Over Dolores?"

"Yes."

"Don Caddo affects to be her mother's friend."

"There's just where his shrewd playing comes in," declared Basil.

"He came away from the house a short time ago."

"Since the fracas at the Cold Deck?"

"Since the quarrel there."

"Where is he now?"

Braddock shook his head.

"Don Caddo is a queer quantity," continued Shott.

"And a mystery."

"To a certain extent."

"Who is he?"

"The Carquinez Cat" smiled the nabob.

"Yes, we all know that. But, what has he been in the past?"

"Ask him and get no satisfactory answer," was the reply.

Braddock seemed to grow dark in the face.

"He is a man with a history which he does not want brought to light," he said, sharply, and with ill feeling. "There is mixed blood in his veins, but the Spanish predominates. Like that people, he carries a knife with a needle-like point, and an edge like a razor. He will sneak after a person after dark with the step of a lynx. In short, Don Caddo is nearly as much a mystery, without the hood, as Captain Cobra is with it. He is playing friend to Madam Marcia, in order to hoodwink Dolores. I don't like such proceedings. I'm a friend to the angel of Santa Leo. I hate a yaller serpent."

Shott saw that hot blood was again getting the upper hand of Braddock's reason, and once more he walked away, this time without being followed.

"I wish Captain Cobra would leave his infernal notice to quit at the mouth of Lost Angel Mine!" growled Basil, while he watched the young American out of sight. "The Cardinal and his gang won't call Don Caddo publicly to account for his menace at the Cold Deck; but, they'll conspire to trip him in some manner. They want his rich strike. It has secret treasure cells which they cannot enter. It is an underground realm of mysteries which the boldest Serpent in Santa Leo is afraid to explore for fear of the dagger, the quick eye and the deadly hand of its owner."

Meantime Sam Shott had reached his house. It was the largest and best dwelling in the California town.

Here and there in a quiet way were evidences of the American's great wealth. The market of San Francisco had furnished his home among the Santa Barbara Hills with many costly knick-knacks. The floors were well carpeted, the walls were adorned with splendid paper and pictures, and a case of choice volumes in the library told that the young Cresus of Santa Leo was more than a mere mine-boss, and a better man than the magnate of the "tough" towns.

When Sam Shott entered the library and had turned on the light he found a bit of folded paper lying on his table.

Picking it up with much eagerness he looked at the signature and then read as follows:

"CAPTAIN SHOTT:—

"You told me once that you would take care of Dolores if I ever came to you in need. I come in that condition now. From this night Santa Leo loses the woman whom it has known as Madam Marcia. I cannot tell you what has happened, but I would sooner take my own life than face that which I know is about to confront me. Dolores, innocent, unsuspecting child, knows nothing. May Almighty God keep her forever ignorant of the past! Take care of her for me. The time is near at hand when she will need an arm like yours. Santa Leo is on the verge of a volcano, the explosion of which will involve more than one person—friend and foe—in destruction. The hand of a madman—a devil incarnate—is about to deal a blow which will rule or ruin. I cannot stay and face the shame of an exposure. In another part of the country, perhaps in another world, the name you have known will be rehabilitated, and the scavenger who rakes up the past shall have vengeance for his reward. When Captain Cobra comes, as come he will, in time, he will not frighten me with his knife-perced paper. For God's sake let him not touch the child I leave behind! MADAM MARCIA."

Sam Shott read this startling document twice before he looked up.

Its contents seemed to fall upon him like a thunderbolt from a clear summer sky.

"In heaven's name, what can have driven Madam Marcia from Santa Leo?" he exclaimed.

"She says she will not remain and face exposure. Who has threatened her? Don Caddo in his zeal to obtain possession of Dolores, admitting that Basil's suspicions are well founded? She hints at a hand that is not his. She mentions Captain Cobra at the close. Is he the one who has frightened her off? I recollect that once Madam Marcia told me the hooded face of the mountain mystery was not a puzzle to every one, and there she stopped, grew white, and left the room. I may not be too late to check her flight."

Concealing the letter in his pocket, the Santa Leo mine-owner left the house and hastened toward Madam Marcia's dwelling.

A rap brought Dolores to the door.

"Your mother?" asked Shott with anxiety.

"She is not here," answered Dolores.

"When can I see her?"

"When she returns or to-morrow if she comes back late. She has gone to her private office in the mine."

With a few more words calculated to disarm the girl of all suspicion Shott turned away.

"She is not at the office. She has told Dolores so in order to get away," he said to himself. "However, I can go and see," and he went toward the mine which the shrewd woman had operated with astonishing success, it being one of the best paying in Santa Leo.

Twenty minutes later, Sam Shott found himself at the mouth of the Mountain Rosebud—Madam Marcia's property.

He had been there before; he knew the way to the office in the dark, and this time he found it without difficulty.

Somewhat to his astonishment, he discovered the little door ajar.

He pushed it open and went in, taking a lucifer from his pocket at the same time.

The next moment, with a startling cry, he stopped and then bent forward.

Madam Marcia lay on her face at his feet.

CHAPTER V.

THE IRON KNIFE.

"HER flight did not extend far," exclaimed Sam Shott, turning the face on the floor so that he could see it by the light of his match. "She came here for the purpose of putting herself out of the way. The threat of her foe was too much for her."

The young mine-king continued to gaze into the dead face, until his light admonished him that he would soon be left in darkness.

The mother of Dolores was beautiful in death, her face not quite as dark as during her life. Her hands were tightly clinched, but neither held the instrument of self-destruction.

"She took poison," thought Shott. Then he unclasped her hands, expecting of find a vial of deadly liquid, but he was not rewarded.

Half an hour after the sad discovery, the whole camp knew that the most noted woman in the Santa Barbara country had been found dead in her mine, and some of the toughest citizens of the camp had to turn away when Dolores, with a wild cry, threw herself across the body.

The corpse of Madam Marcia was taken from the mine to the little room she had lately left, and Dolores was soon alone with her dead.

The grief of the girl was of the most poignant kind.

Every now and then a dark figure would glide to the window beside the door, and a pair of black but sympathetic eyes would look in upon the silent and bowed figure, that kept vigil over the dead on the cot.

At last when, in the small hours of the morning the camp was silent for once, the measured tread of a horse came down the street.

The darkest hour of the night had come and the moon no longer dotted the ground with the shadows of the houses.

A dim light faintly revealed the plain interior of Madam Marcia's home.

The approaching horse drew from the middle of the street and neared the house. Its rider guided it to the very door; there he drew rein and leaning to one side put his face against the window.

No, not his face, for it was impossible for his skin to touch the panes.

The man wore a close-fitting hood, with holes for his eyes which were restless and keen, shining like polished buttons at the window, as the lamp beyond revealed them.

There was but one hooded individual in the whole country and he was Captain Cobra, whose name seemed to fit his profession.

That which he saw in the room beyond the window must have interested him.

Dolores was no longer in the apartment; the Angel of Santa Leo had retired to an adjoining room, exhausted and in need of sleep.

She did not think that any one would come, much less dream that Captain Cobra himself would invade the camp and look in upon the sheeted form of her dead mother.

The horse stood motionless by the window while the Mystery of the Mountains gazed upon that silent tenant of the cot.

Did he know that Madam Marcia had mysteriously departed this life?

Was he aware of the fact that there was an ugly whisper in camp that the woman had been murdered?

At any rate he seemed to take a great interest in what he saw by the light of the lamp.

For ten minutes he sat like a statue in the saddle and eyed the sheeted form.

When he rode away it was at the same measured gait with which he had come.

A spy could have followed Captain Cobra with ease. It was a splendid opportunity for Braddock if that hot-headed, suspicious individual had been abroad.

Captain Cobra continued his course until he once more left the street and rode forward to a stoutly-built one story house whose door was composed of heavy oak timbers.

He rode close enough to touch the door without leaning, and took from an inner pocket a paper and from his belt a bowie knife.

The latter was a rough-looking weapon with a six-inch blade and a handle of iron, without any attempt at polish or ornamentation.

Captain Cobra opened the paper which was not more than six inches square and held it against the door with his left hand.

Then, he pressed the knife's point into the thick planks, and straight through the heart of the paper, pinning it to the panel as securely as if it had been nailed there.

For a few moments Captain Cobra contemplated his work as if with satisfaction; then he deliberately rode on, following the street until it terminated toward the foot of the treasure hills which arose, dark and grim, against the early morning sky.

As the man mystery of California had come without warning, he departed without disturbing a single inhabitant.

At the confines of Santa Leo he seemed to touch his horse with the spurs, for, all at once, the animal started up and the next moment something like a flying specter flitted between two hills.

When the morning came a man with a flowing red beard sprung from a cot in one corner of a room and hastily dressed himself.

"I'll tighten the coils on him before sundown!" exclaimed this individual. "I told Caliban that the button in the buckskin purse was enough to rid Santa Leo of Don Caddo, but, we'll make conviction doubly sure. It'll do more than clip the claws of the Cat. Madam Marcia will play an important part in our little game, even though she lies dead at her home. When you beat the Cardinal, Don Caddo, you must hold the best hand ever seen in these parts—a hand entirely invincible."

The red rough proceeding to his door, jerked it open, when his eye caught the flutter of a paper and the next moment he was staring at it and at the knife that pinned it to the door.

A pallor which he could not keep back chased all color from his face and several seconds elapsed before he got courage enough to bend forward and read the heavy handwriting that covered the paper in part.

The lines were underscored, the letters were in broad black and the Cardinal read half aloud as follows:

"A WORD TO THE WISE!"

"The tenant of this cabin is hereby warned to quit the same and the town of Santa Leo within two days or suffer the usual consequences that follow a disobedience of the commands of Captain Cobra. The wise man flees. The fool remains and dies! It is an easy journey for the iron knife from the cabin door to its owner's heart."

"Let the warned one reflect and act."

"CAPTAIN COBRA."

"The Man of the Hood."

At the reading his eyes fairly flashed with rage.

"Fool! you'll find me here after two days!" he cried. "You may frighten fools and sometimes pin the poor devils to the ground with your iron-hilted knives, but I stay where I am. You forget what I have been, Captain Cobra. For once, at least you have found your match. The Cardinal of Santa Leo stands his ground and plays out the game already in hand."

Rutherford walked to the Cold Deck, which already held a number of early customers and started them with the story of his discovery.

Santa Leo speedily had another sensation, and, in less than five minutes after the red rough's narrative a crowd of toughs stood in front of the house reading for themselves the knife-pierced message from Captain Cobra.

Although the hooded chief had posted his warnings in other places, it was the first time he had invaded Santa Leo.

Why should he select Rutherford for the first object of his wrath?

If Captain Cobra claimed the ground in which the prosperous mines had been opened, why had he not warned Sam Shott to leave?—for Shott, and not Rutherford was the greater offender, owning, as he did, more than one-half of the shafts that yielded so well?

The Cardinal laughed at the warning. He stood before the crowd and defied the quiet and dangerous man who had invaded the camp before day and posted his notice.

The red beard waved in the wind and the eyes of its possessor glittered maliciously while he joked over the iron knife whose counterpart as every man in the crowd knew had been found in the heart of men as boastful and defiant as the chief of the Silver Serpents.

Group after group gathered in front of the door as the morning advanced.

It was the objective point for the curious, and, in viewing the warning, the tragic death of Madam Marcia was almost forgotten.

Among those who came to read was Don Caddo.

It happened that he found himself alone before the door, whether by design or accident will never be known.

A strange smile lurked at his lips under cover of his dark mustache and he read the warning to himself, after which his keen eyes inspected the knife.

If he could have penetrated the recesses of the darkened room beyond the Cardinal's door, he would have seen a pair of eyes that shone like a serpent's.

"You're laughing in your sleeve to think that Captain Cobra should select me from all!" cried the observer. "Before he comes I will have paid you back for the wrench you gave my neck!"

CHAPTER VI.

A HOT-HEAD'S SHOT.

LONG before the sun touched the meridian that day, every soul in Santa Leo but one had read the warning on the Cardinal's door, and had inspected the iron-hilted knife.

This exception was Dolores, the now orphaned child of the woman whom Sam Shott had found dead in her mine.

Dolores had seen but few friendly faces since the startling return home of her mother.

It was nearly noon when she was startled by the opening of her door, and the next moment she found herself face to face with the Cardinal.

It was the first time she had seen the man since his terrible threats which had stretched her mother in a swoon at her feet, and probably hastened her death.

There seemed to be a malignant and triumphant glitter in the man's eyes, and his first glance was toward the covered figure on the cot.

"I did not think she'd do that," said Rutherford.

"Do what?" responded Dolores quickly.

"Why, take her own life."

In another moment the figure of the girl seemed to increase in stature.

"I don't believe she did take her own life!" she exclaimed.

"The camp thinks so, at any rate."

"I can't help what the camp thinks. Do they say *why* she should have killed herself?"

"There's a difference of opinion."

"What do some say?"

A smile began to lurk among the red hairs at the Cardinal's mouth.

"They think she had a past that was unpleasant."

"You threw something of that kind in her teeth last night!" cried Dolores, her hands shutting despite herself while she looked at Rutherford.

"I didn't think they'd drive her to suicide."

"There you come back to the false theory—to the stain which some would put upon her even in death. My mother's taking off is not on her own hands. She was killed. I don't say by whom nor where; but I stand here proclaiming to the world that the body yonder was not brought to its death by her own hands."

"That's better than having her guilty of self-murder," said the Cardinal.

"What! do you doubt?" and stepping to the couch, Dolores lifted the covering that shrouded the dead. "I dressed her for burial, and I found proof against the charge of self-murder. Would you see, Thor Rutherford?"

The Cardinal did not move.

"Come forward," commanded the girl, at which he went toward the bier. "Madam Marcia carries a dagger-wound in her heart—not of the kind made by the iron knife which I am told is sticking in your door, but a wound exceeding small, though sufficient to kill."

While she spoke, the girl, with steady fingers, parted the burial drapery on Madam Marcia's bosom and revealed to the distended eyes of her giant visitor a dark stab not half an inch in length.

It was directly over the heart, showing that the person who dealt the blow knew just where to strike, and that one stroke had been sufficient.

"Bonanza Shott, who was the first to find her, saw no weapon in the office," Dolores proceeded, looking into the Cardinal's face. "If she had inflicted that wound the dagger would have been found in her hand or on the floor. It is *murder*—but by whom? As yet the secret belongs to the assassin and his God. Whether he waited for Madam Marcia in the mine, or followed her thither, is one of the mysteries to which I have sworn to devote my life."

"You might find your theory wrong, after all."

"Then I fail," returned Dolores, promptly.

"My mother is to be buried at sundown," she resumed.

"On the mountain?"

"No; in her mine."

The Cardinal looked surprised.

"There is, as you may know, a secret tomb in the hidden depths of the Mountain Rosebud," continued the girl. "Madam Marcia had it prepared several years ago. The place is reached by devious windings and the journey, even when one is not incumbered, is attended by a good deal of danger. The body must be let down into the tomb, which can be covered with a large flat stone that hangs above it by iron grappling hooks. After all, it is a better place for the body than the cemetery on the mountain-side. Bonanza Shott and one or two others have promised to conduct the burial. Shott is the only one that knows the way to the tomb. He will be guide and director, and Madam Marcia shall be laid away under his eye."

The Cardinal left Dolores alone, after saying, with a reckless laugh, that he intended to let the iron dagger remain in his door until Captain Cobra came for it in person, or till the elements forced it from the wood.

The girl watched his stalwart figure with a great deal of silent interest while he moved off, and not until he had disappeared did she close the door and go back to duties that pressed upon her.

If Rutherford intended to visit Don Caddo with a revengeful *coup* of some kind, he seemed to make no headway toward the effort.

He saw the sun dropping toward the western horizon and the shadows of the houses of Santa Leo lengthened across the streets.

It wanted a few minutes of four when a

brown-shirted man with an excited air burst into the Cold Deck Saloon and interrupted half a dozen games.

"If you want to see Captain Cobra, come to the door!" he exclaimed. "He's not near enough to nail his notice to quit to your doors, but he's visible all the same."

There was a general rush toward the open door, men dropping their hands and leaving the stakes on the various tables.

"Yonder he is!" and the informer pointed toward a bit of table-land several hundred feet above Santa Leo and in full view of the whole town. Rising above the mesa was a wall of rock strangely white, and against it in the full beams of the golden orb hanging low in the sky all saw the figures of horse and rider.

The distance was too great to clearly distinguish human features, if such had been visible, but all saw that the head of the man was covered by a hood of some dark texture which in turn was surmounted by a broad-brimmed hat.

There was no mistaking the identity of the person thus seen. Captain Cobra, the Hooded Mystery, was in plain view, looking down upon Santa Leo, if not directly upon the group in front of the Cold Deck.

For several seconds the men of the camp looked and said nothing.

Each one seemed busy with his own thoughts, and more than one doubtless measured the distance with the eye and wondered if a bullet from a Winchester stood any chance of emptying the saddle overhead.

All at once the hand of Captain Cobra went up to his hat. It was removed and held alongside the saddle, when all saw the unmistakable hood whose ends fell over his shoulders, hiding the long hair he was supposed to have.

The next instant the gazers in front of the saloon received a violent shock.

It came in the shape of a sharp report, and as the gamblers turned to see who had fired, they saw the tableau on the table-land rudely broken.

At the same time a man appeared with a smoking rifle in his hands.

It was Basil Braddock, the hot-head of Santa Leo.

"I generally wing my birds," cried the man, pointing toward the rock. "It was a long shot, but it got there. They have said that Captain Cobra is bullet-proof. Does that look like it, pards?"

All eyes had wandered from the marksman to the man overhead.

The horse was still there, but Captain Cobra, instead of sitting upright in the saddle, lay forward on the dark neck, and the hat he had held in his hand was on the ground.

While the astonished gamblers stared, Captain Cobra's horse moved on, but the position of his rider did not change.

"If he gets away now we may never see that face!" cried Braddock. "The horse will go back to the secret quarters and Captain Cobra will forever remain the mystery he is now. I'd give my shares in the mine of eternal glory to jerk the black hood from his face and take a fair look at it."

"Maybe you'd better follow him, Basil."

Braddock did not reply.

He was looking at a man who had been drawn from a cabin by the shot, and who was watching the horse slowly bearing Captain Cobra away.

"Did you do that?" asked this person coming toward Basil and covering him with a pair of deep black eyes.

"It looks that way," laughed Braddock patting the gun.

"Did he ever injure you?"

"No. Don Caddo, Captain Cobra never touched me, but you know what he is and what he does. There's one of his knives in the Cardinal's door at this very moment. You don't know when there'll be one in yours. I shot Captain Cobra in self-defense. The madman was liable to give me notice to quit, and I don't want to be pinned to the ground with an iron knife. Not just yet, Don Caddo." And Basil ended with a laugh during which he looked up at the mountain with a devilish glitter in his eye.

"If you haven't killed him, look out!" said the Carquinez Cat, watching Basil.

"Does a man hang to a horse that way who has a chance for his life? He is stiffening in the saddle; his grip in the animal's mane is the grip of death. You may shake your head, Don Caddo; but Captain Cobra has pinned his last notice to a shanty door. And, what is more, there isn't an avenger in the world!"

Don Caddo made no reply, but his gaze wandered from the lofty trail to the man with the Winchester, and while Braddock wondered what his look meant, he re-entered the house, shutting the door softly behind him.

When Basil looked up at the mountain again the trail was deserted.

CHAPTER VII.

THE VICTIM OF THE SHOT.

WE will go up the mountain, quitting Santa Leo for a time, and follow the fortunes of the mysterious man whom Braddock's bullet had "winged."

The faithful animal bearing his unconscious master, whose hands were fastened in the mane, proceeded slowly over the elevated trail which was narrow and dangerous.

The dark hood concealed every part of Captain Cobra's face. His head touched the neck of his horse, and, for a long time, he did not show the slightest signs of life.

It looked as if the bullet of the California hot-head had found his heart and that the grip on the mane was that of death itself.

If Braddock had been active he might have overtaken his victim and had the pleasure of jerking the hood from his face, for the horse did not get out of his painful walk until he had left the roughness of the trail and reached a lower and smoother region.

By this time the sun had gone down, and the whole country was cast in shadow.

Night was coming rapidly on, and the grim spurs of the Santa Barbara Range were beginning to lose their individuality against the darkening sky.

Captain Cobra's horse had borne him some miles from the scene of his last adventure before anything occurred to indicate that Basil's shot had not been a death one.

Then there was a slight movement by the man in the saddle.

He raised his head, but for some seconds his hands did not relax their grip.

The eyes that glittered behind the hood had a wild, half-crazed look.

At length one of the hands left the steed's mane, and was lifted to the left temple.

It was that side of Captain Cobra's head which had lain on the animal's neck. Fresh stains were there, and the hood had a cut in it like one likely to made with a ragged-edged knife.

By degrees, the rider seemed to come back to himself. It might have been that the brisk mountain wind assisted in this restoration; at any rate, he recovered rapidly as the horse carried him through a country open here and there with occasional clumps of chaparral, and now and then a silver stream.

Not once did he remove the hood to inspect the wound he had undoubtedly received. He seemed to fear the presence of watchful eyes even there, though it would have taken keen ones to have told what he was like under the moon, which nearly all the time was obscured.

Captain Cobra appeared to let his horse take his own time.

The animal at length struck into a smart gallop, with his master once more erect in the saddle, hatless of course—he had lost his famous hat where he was shot, as we know—but with the hood for a head-dress, though cut on one temple, and stained with his blood.

All at once the horse turned to one side at the ruin of a natural basin, and carried Captain Cobra among a lot of rough hills, where both disappeared in a short time.

It was not long thereafter that the strange man drew rein and looked back over the trail.

His keen eyes seemed to be on the lookout for spies, but none came to disturb him and he went on again.

Presently he rode between the two hills which, at some remote day, must have been one. A convulsion must have divided them for the sides that confronted each other looked as if they had been violently rent apart.

Captain Cobra sprang to ground at the rough wall of the hill on his left.

He took another survey of his surroundings. It was rapid but keen, and then he led his horse forward and both vanished, in the very heart of the hill itself!

Captain Cobra had returned to one of his haunts, to one which the many enemies he had had never found.

The interior of the hill was dark, but the Mystery kept on through the narrow corridor until he stood in an underground chamber which he revealed by a match.

Here he turned and slipped the saddle from his horse's back. The bridle next followed and the animal proceeded to a trough in the wall and began to eat.

Captain Cobra himself went on.

In a little while another match showed him another chamber which contained a cot in one corner, a rough table and a brace of stools.

Here the match was applied to the wick of a lamp and a steady flame secured.

Captain Cobra now, for the first time, seemed to think of lifting the hood he wore.

After a thorough search of the cavern with his eyes he removed his mask.

In the light of the lamp he stood revealed as a remarkably handsome man. His face, a trifle dark, was clean cut and smooth. It was the face of a cool, determined man as the welded lips and deep-set black eyes indicated. He might have been fifty, though a face like his can not be depended on to tell correctly its owner's age.

His hair was long, as outside tradition had made it. It was like his piercing eyes—as dark as the raven's wing, and fell in black masses to his shoulders though it did not escape beneath the ends of his hood.

One side of his face was covered with half-dried blood, which he washed off in a basin of

water. Then his fingers felt of the wound inflicted by Braddock's bullet—a cut of an inch along the left temple, tearing the skin and flesh—enough to render him unconscious and apparently dead.

A few strips of adhesive plaster, with which the simple medicine chest of the cave home was supplied, attended to the cut and then Captain Cobra spoke for the first time.

"I wasn't looking for the shot," said he, addressing himself. "I did not see the hot-head until the smoke of his rifle announced the shot, and then it was too late to dodge. I was looking down into their camp and especially at the crowd in front of the Cold Deck. They had caught sight of me and were looking closely, wishing, no doubt, that they had the man who left the iron knife in the Cardinal's door. Wait! I will find the man who fired the shot. I'll show him ere long that he had better have killed Captain Cobra, for his own good. What a den of rattlers they have there, anyhow! Who was lying in Madam Marcia's cabin, sheeted for the grave? Was it the woman herself? I should have raised the latch and gone in. But, I will know, by and by. When I go back to Santa Leo I will let the serpents there know that Captain Cobra has a good claim on every foot of ground they have usurped, and that their bonanzas belong to him. The iron knife is no myth! The man who found it in his door at daylight is liable to feel it elsewhere.

"The Red Cardinal! By my life, the name fits him well!" and Captain Cobra laughed till the walls of the cavern sent back the echo from every side. "And there is Don Caddo, too—Don Caddo, the Carquinez Cat, or the man with nine lives. I've seen him hanging by his finger-ends to the fringe of a precipice a thousand feet deep, with a roaring Colorado torrent beneath. They used to say that he let go and fell, but I know better. His presence in Santa Leo gives the lie to that. One of these days, Don Caddo, we'll stand face to face—that is, if you don't let the Silver Serpents of the camp strangle you with their deadly folds.

"And Sam Shott, too!—Bonanza Shott!—the man who can hardly count his big mines on his fingers! I know him. There's one thing in his favor. He's American! The Carquinez Cat has mixed blood in his veins; so has the Red Cardinal and nearly all his men. There was a time when 'California for Californians!' was the cry in every camp. But, the Mexican has come; the half-breed serpent hisses in the native grass, and the Indian holds some of the best bonanza lands out of doors. The Chinese are here, too. I hate the yellow cats, yet I ought to be friendly with the race. But, let me look at the list. I like to compare it with the old map. The iron-knife is in the Red Cardinal's door. What will he do?—laugh or leave? The chances are that he will defy the warning and laugh at the hand of Captain Cobra!"

The man of mystery went to the darkest corner of the chamber and came back with a package as long as his hand and about as thick.

Putting on the hood again, he seated himself at the table and untied the string that bound the package.

The work before him seemed to afford him unusual delight, for his eyes got an eager glitter once more.

"This is it!" exclaimed Captain Cobra, catching up a bit of paper which fell from the package upon the table. "These are the four-and-twenty masked men of California. The iron knife has not been idle," and a smile must have overspread the captain's face from the gleam in his eyes as he looked over the names on the paper, at least half of which had a red mark across them.

"I have come to the Red Cardinal," he went on, his eyes resting on a name midway in the list. "The next man is Don Caddo; then follow name by name the honorable members of the Silver Serpent of Santa Leo. The eye of God and the orb of vengeance never sleep!"

He continued to gaze for several minutes at the names before him.

"From Shasta to Sonoma—from camp to camp—from canyon to canyon!" said he. "The hood of Captain Cobra means death. The name I bear is feared like that of my serpent namesake of the Indies. The iron knife and the warning has gone together ever since the perpetration of a deed which for cool devilry and infamy has no equal in the annals of crime. They think I kill promiscuously—that I am a madman who warns and slays for the mere pleasure it affords. Fools! They don't know me! They don't know what the face is like behind the hood I wear! The victims of the iron knife see my features once in their career, but they never tell any one what they are like."

He laughed again, shaking the front of his mask and stopping suddenly:

"Mine is the strangest trail ever trod by man," he resumed. "There never was a drama like this one. I am just getting to work in the second part. I have played my role in other quarters. I am now to finish the play among the wolves and serpents of Santa Leo where a play—desperate and deep—is now going on. But I will give it a fiercer action. Before the God who heard my oath when first uttered

against the merciless gang, I swear that the sting of the American Cobra shall speedily strike the last of the twelve!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE BANKS OF THE STYX.

THE vow of the man of mystery was delivered with all the force and impressiveness that could be thrown into such an event.

During its delivery the single tenant of the underground retreat stood erect, with his splendid figure drawn to its full height and strikingly revealed by the light that permeated the place.

The words seemed to come through the black hood with the force of arrows, and the hand which was lifted toward Heaven during the delivery of the vow did not fall at its owner's side until the last sound had died away.

"Let the Serpents of Santa Leo look out for the iron knife," finished Captain Cobra. "The warning left in the Red Cardinal's door ought to be enough for them all; but the fools won't profit by it. They will wait till the blade has traveled from the door to its owner's heart. They will laugh with Thor Rutherford at Captain Cobra's threat. If they read the past correctly they will see that the future has no mercy for their guilty souls. They belong to the unyielding hand of the man of mystery. The Red Cardinal and his gang, and the Carquinez Cat as well belong to me!"

Captain Cobra went back to the table and took from the package which had held the black list, a small map drawn on dark parchment-like paper. It looked very much like the diagram of a mine or of a mining country, and everything about it betokened age.

He scanned it closely, running his finger over it from point to point, following one line here and another there, like a man trying to reach the center of a labyrinth through devious ways.

After half an hour's work he folded the map and put it away.

Tying up the package with the list inside, he restored it to the place from whence it had been taken, then he took from the same corner a knife with an iron handle, and in every way the counterpart of the one still sticking in Rutherford's door at Santa Leo.

Gazing upon it for several seconds, he thrust it into a leathern sheath at his hip, while his eyes seemed to glow with a look of triumph.

Half an hour later he left the cavern, gliding past his horse in the stall between the inner chamber and the entrance, and disappeared among the shadows beyond.

At precisely the same hour, some miles from these scenes, three men carrying a long object on their shoulders left a house in Santa Leo and took one of the darkest streets leading toward the adjoining hills.

On the inside of the cabin stood a white-faced girl with her hands clasped painfully before her, the sign of poignant sorrow in her face, and her eyes swimming in tears.

She said nothing, made no outward sign of her heart-breaking grief, but, when the last footsteps of the men had died away, she went forward and laid her hand on the latch.

"No! I won't follow them!" she exclaimed, suddenly drawing back. "Sam Shott knows my mother's last wishes, and he will see them carried out to the letter. The secret tomb in the mine is known to him, and the way to it. I can trust the bonanza king of Santa Leo. I am now alone in the world, but my loneliness shall not prevent me from taking vengeance. Madam Marcia was murdered—killed in the mine by an enemy. The Red Cardinal need not call it suicide. He must not think that his threat made her take her life. The Serpents shall not prevent the truth from coming out, nor baffle me when on the trail of the guilty."

Meantime the bearers of Madam Marcia's corpse, with the stalwart Shott at their head, had passed from the mountain camp and vanished among the hills.

After awhile they reached and entered the mouth of the woman's bonanza and guided by a light plunged deep into its recesses.

It was a weird burial, but the fearless men continued to carry the body down into the mine, passing under the heavy beams and throwing the most grotesque shadows against the grim walls.

Led by Sam Shott they kept on until they found themselves in a strange place which seemed to be the end of their journey, for they were confronted by a wall that offered no door to let them pass on.

The young Californian made a sign to his followers and the body was placed on the ground.

Then, holding the light near the wall, Shott disclosed several niches which led upward, and in a moment he was climbing toward the top of the height.

A few moments later he called to his followers from a place overhead, and lowered a coil of rope. This was so secured to the body that it could be lifted, when he was joined by one of the men below.

In a short time the sheeted figure of Madam Marcia rose slowly along the wall and at length it disappeared to the view of the miner left at the foot of the store.

The torch gleamed like a star far overhead. It afforded light enough to enable Sam Shott and his companion to lower the corpse into a deep, dark tomb on the other side of the wall, the top of which they had reached.

Slowly the body descended into the dark until the rope grew slack, when, with a few peculiar jerks, it was loosened and drawn up.

The burial in the mine was at an end, and the owner of the Mountain Rosebud slept in a tomb of her own creation.

Sam Shott and his comrade went down to the waiting one below, but not until they had lowered above the mouth of the grave a heavy stone which had swung over it for years. Having performed this service, they removed the grappling-hooks which had kept the stone in position, and left the mother of Dolores to her last sleep.

"Hist!" suddenly exclaimed one of the three, suddenly clutching Shott's arm, while they were still within the vicinity of the tomb. "A stone fell upon my shoulder from overhead. Is there a pathway above us?"

"Yes, dozens of them," answered the bonanza king.

"This mine was worked by somebody long before Madam Marcia got it. In several chambers there are quaint letters on the wall, showing that its former owners knew something about religious rites and such things."

"Somebody is above us," said the man with positiveness.

The three men stood still some minutes, and listened. They heard nothing, and the torch, which still lit up the walls on either side, did not reveal anything to their searching eyes.

The stone which had fallen upon the man's shoulder, had been loosened by a foot which had a tread of velvet.

While the three listened amid the darkness, a human figure leaned against the wall of a ledge, and eyed them with the fierceness of a prowling lynx.

If they could have seen this figure—if their eyes could have pierced the darkness—they would have made out the well-known form, and the flowing red beard of Thor Rutherford—the man warned by the iron knife!

His footing was insecure, for he had to make his way along a narrow ledge, with a wall of unknown height above him, but he stood in the path with as much ease as though he were firmly planted in the center of a mine chamber.

All the time he watched the three men, waiting, perhaps, for another stone to drop from above. He smiled while he looked, and kept one hand conveniently near the six-shooter which he carried at his hip.

The Red Cardinal had come to Madam Marcia's mine for a purpose.

Was he on his way to the tomb which had just received the body of the woman he had threatened with exposure?

She had passed beyond the machinations of man. Why should he enter her mine!

There were no secrets which he could wring from her now so he might as well go back and play his game against the Carquinez Cat.

Several minutes elapsed before Sam Shott and his companions moved on.

When they had disappeared the Cardinal again resumed his journey.

He hugged the wall and kept along the ledge, knowing that a misstep would cost him his life.

At last he reached the end of the dark pathway.

"Captain Shott has fulfilled his mission," said he with a low laugh. "They have put Madam Marcia away but the secret is mine, for all. I hold the card that will capture the prize of the game in spite of the iron knife in my door. They don't know the Red Cardinal of Santa Leo. The claws of the Carquinez Cat nor the knife of Captain Cobra shall not balk me."

Rutherford who had stooped at the fringe of the ledge lowered a coil of rope, the upper end of which he made fast to a peculiar rock that jutted out from the wall. Then, with the fearlessness of a true desperado, he lowered himself into the darkness and stood on firm ground.

Hastily coiling the cord and hiding it beneath his coat he started off down a dark corridor, almost on a run.

Suddenly a few seconds afterward he stopped and threw a hand up to his ear.

"Gods!" cried he. "I don't hear the river. It can't be that I have taken the wrong route? The descent ought to be hereabouts. If I thought—"

A light flashing up directly ahead broke the sentence.

He drew his revolver and backed against the nearest wall, holding his breath and watching the tiny flame with eager eyes.

"What is better than this?" he said as the light revealed first the vague outlines of a human figure and then showed it in vivid detail.

"I have missed my course, but this is fortunate. I have come to the river—the mysterious underground Styx whose origin and outlet are unknown, but not where I expected to strike it. Its flow is silent here. I have at my mercy the man I am playing against—the shrewd Cat from Carquinez!—the wretch who loves Dolores

and hates the Silver Serpent of Santa Leo. Why fetch him to trial for the old crime? Why go to all that trouble?"

During this speech the Cardinal's hand was creeping upward. It did not rest until the revolver covered the figure revealed by the light ahead.

Don Caddo was at the mercy of the merciless. He stood on the bank of the buried river of the Santa Barbara Hills. Rutherford saw the glitter of the water at his back.

"Stand where you are, Cat!" suddenly exclaimed the Cardinal.

At the sound of his voice Don Caddo started forward; his hand went toward his belt, but he did not draw.

"I have you!" continued Rutherford. "The game between us ends here, on the banks of the underground Styx!"

Not another word was spoken before the loud report that filled the vaulted spot; but a wild cry followed the shot, and the figure that fell back spun half-way round at the very edge of the water, and then pitched headlong into the dark flow and vanished from the blazing eyes that looked on.

CHAPTER IX.

THE NEEDLE'S STING.

WITH the vanishing of the Carquinez Cat the light which had revealed him to the Red Cardinal went out as though it had disappeared with him beneath the waves.

Rutherford advanced to the brink of the buried river, but saw nothing. The only sound that reached his ears was the mournful swish of the Stygian waters at his feet. It almost sent a shudder through his stalwart frame, and in a little while he drew back, leaving the stream to keep the secret of Don Caddo's doom.

Instead of going back over the trail which had brought him to the spot, the red giant of Santa Leo felt his way along a narrow corridor which, in time, brought him into a vaulted chamber—Madam Marcia's assay room, as it was called. Rutherford had been there before, and knew the several passages leading from it.

Crossing the room the Cardinal disappeared again in one of the dark ways and soon came out in another underground room, which had the appearance of an office of some sort.

He now carried a miner's lamp, and its light revealed the irregular sides of the chamber.

The Cardinal held the lamp near the floor, and saw there a dark stain. He had come to the room in which Madam Marcia had been found by Sam Shott and the dark spot on the stone floor was the stain of human blood.

Instead of seeking the office by a direct route, the captain of the Silver Serpents had reached it circuitously.

He placed his light on the table and went to work.

There stood in one corner of the chamber, and deeply imbedded in the wall, an iron safe in which Madam Marcia was supposed to keep her treasures.

The Cardinal had come to the office provided with the proper instruments for attacking this safe.

He began his task coolly and with a look of confidence in his eyes.

The door of the office was shut but not locked behind him, and the lamp placed so as to throw its full light upon the front of the safe did not cast his shadow on the wall beyond.

The first efforts of the burglar were somewhat disappointing, but perseverance soon threw back the heavy door, and the wealth of the dead woman was at his disposal.

The interior of the safe was not large. A number of small drawers greeted the Cardinal's vision.

"The real treasure lies beyond this sham," he said, smiling, and the next moment his hands lifted the whole inside frame-work of the safe from its place, and he saw an opening large enough to admit his body, gigantic as it was.

Picking up the lamp the Cardinal crawled into the safe. He passed beyond the threshold and emerged into a room in which he could stand erect without touching the ceiling.

"She had but one secret which I never could get hold of," muttered Rutherford. "It may be here. This is the inner treasure-room, whose existence is so deftly concealed by the safe. If Madam Marcia's great secret is anywhere but in her dead heart, it is here."

The room was not large, but it showed signs of having been lately visited.

The Cardinal went to a strong desk in one corner. It was locked, but he broke into it and threw the rays of his lamp into every part.

Here and there were papers tied up in little packages. He knew them to be the woman's accounts with her workmen, her overseers' reports and so forth, and he did not disturb them.

All at once his searching hand pounced upon a small box as large as the area of one of his dark palms, and covered with black velvet. It stood in the most remote corner of the desk, and other eyes than his eagle-like and piercing could not have found it.

The Cardinal took up the box with burning eagerness.

He placed the lamp in the desk and fell to ex-

amining the box as if the secret he was looking for was within his grasp.

Suddenly a cry of pain was forced from his lips, and he dropped the box.

Something like a needle-point had entered his thumb. The sting had sent a pain through his entire body, and, while he glared at the innocent looking box the sensation grew more intense, until all his nerves seemed to feel the shock.

"I once knew a man who had a box whose sting was death," said the Cardinal. "Colonel Midas, who was killed in the Shasta country years ago, knew all about the secret death agents of the Italians and Mexicans. When we finished him we did not find a single secret weapon on his person, but he knew about them all the same. In God's name, with what was that infernal needle charged?"

He picked up the box, carefully avoiding the metallic button which he had touched before, and held it to the light.

The velvet was old and apparently moth-eaten in several places. The box itself looked valueless.

Suddenly the Cardinal caught up a piece of iron lying in the desk and struck the button a smart blow.

The lid of the mysterious box flew open with a click, but, at the same time, Rutherford threw it down and went back.

"I'm afire within!" cried he. "In the name of the saints, where is the buried river?"

He felt like a man being consumed by an inward fire which, as he well knew, was the poison received from the hidden needle of Madam Marcia's box.

He forgot his lamp in the agony of the moment.

With a curse he staggered toward the door, and began to creep through the safe to the chamber beyond.

The Cardinal had the eyes of a madman. His skin was hot and dry; his cheeks red, and his veins swelled out like whipcords.

He did not stop to put back the drawers and the frame-work, nor to close the door of the safe, but rushing from the office he staggered down the first corridor he found, and kept on with the insane rage of a wounded boar.

"The river! the river!" he exclaimed. "I'd give all I'm worth to be this moment where Don Caddo is. I must cool my body in the cold waters of the Styx or die. I could drink the river dry. A thousand curses on Madam Marcia's box!"

He ran on in his madness, breaking out in cries of pain, for the secret sting was still doing its work.

But, the river did not reward the Cardinal. All at once he saw ahead the glittering diamond field of stars.

He had reached the mouth of the mine!

For a moment he seemed inclined to go back, and seek the river again, but second thought took him forward, and, in a little while, he was bounding past the cabins of Santa Leo.

Suddenly the gamblers at the Cold Deck saloon saw the figure of the Cardinal cross the threshold, and land at the bar.

His aspect was enough to rivet their gaze, and half a dozen threw down their cards, and came forward.

The universal thought was that Rutherford had encountered Captain Cobra!

Beating the top of the counter with his fist, he demanded whisky, and when the bottle was pushed toward him, he broke its neck, and held the gaping mouth to his lips, until he had drained it of every drop!

"Fire and fire! We'll see which kind will conquer!" he cried, turning upon the astonished crowd. "We must fight the devil with his own weapons, ha, ha! What are you staring at? Fools! go back to your games!"

Some obeyed but others did not stir.

"Where did you find him, captain?" asked one.

"Find who?"

"Captain Cobra."

The Cardinal broke into a boisterous laugh.

"I haven't seen the hooded snake!" he exclaimed, "I have been fighting another enemy with Dude Dan's fire-water."

"A rattlesnake, eh?"

"Yes, but not the kind that rattles before it stings. Never mind. I'm better now. I feel one fire putting out the other. Is the iron knife still in my door?"

"It is there."

"Good! When Captain Cobra comes he'll find me ready for him. Another dose of your hottest, Dan."

The man behind the counter obeyed, and those, who looked on saw the Cardinal send another tremendous drink after the first.

"Gentlemen, I owe you all an explanation," said Rutherford stepping into the center of the room. "I came in like a madman. I believe I was mad. There was poison in my veins; it is there still, though the burning fluid I have swallowed is putting out its fires. Beyond this I cannot go. I have not met Captain Cobra, whose knife is in my door, but I swear to you that the Cardinal will be here when he comes, if the hooded coward has sand enough to cross the

boundaries of Santa Leo. What say you, gentlemen. Will he do it?"

"You know what he has done, Cardinal?" asked a little man at the nearest table.

"He has come upon men in the night and left the iron dagger in their breasts!" was the answer. "Captain Cobra is a bandit who kills like an enraged tiger for the mere sake of killing. I want him to come. With his blade in my door I dare the midnight scoundrel to come for the life of the Cardinal!"

"He's apt to accept the challenge," returned the same little man who had before spoken.

"I want it accepted. I don't believe that Braddock killed him on the mountain. The man of mystery, as we call him, isn't to pass in his chips in a manner so tame as all that. If you can send him word, say that Rutherford, his last warned victim, waits for him in defiance and eagerness."

"I?" cried the little man, astonished.

"You!" And the Cardinal, suddenly covering the gambler with his finger, stepped toward the table. "You have played an underhanded game ever since you set foot in Santa Leo. Don't get red and bite your lip. I don't intend to read your record here. I'm not fighting you, now. You are the shadow of the Carquinez Cat. You are the file for the Cat's claws when they get dull; but, let me say, Major Midget, that you've filed them for the last time!" And the Red Cardinal turned his back on the crowd.

CHAPTER X.

THE STORY OF COLONEL MIDAS.

"You don't want to follow the Red Cardinal."

"Who said I intend to?"

"You've got it in your eye, though. It doesn't take a blind man to see that."

"Well, I'm not following him. I am going home."

"After your revolvers?"

"No. I have them here. See!" And the speaker, a wiry-looking little man, with coal-black eyes full of flash, opened his coat and showed his companion the butts of two six-shooters in his belt.

Major Midget, with whom the Red Cardinal had had his last words before quitting the saloon, deserved the name. He was the smallest man in stature in Santa Leo. He was shorter than hunchback Caliban, Rutherford's housekeeper and guard; but, despite his build, he was handsome, which Caliban was not.

Major Midget owned no mine. He had charge of one of Sam Shott's best yielding shafts, and the only fault he had was his quick temper, which, up to the closing scene of the foregoing chapter, he had never been known to control. That he had sounded all the depths of a life of adventure the gold-camp knew, but the pards of Santa Leo had never obtained any particulars of his career.

He had been followed from the saloon by a tall, broad-shouldered man named Durango Dan, ex-stage driver, Indian-fighter and gambler.

He was not known as a member of Rutherford's gang of Silver Serpents. In fact, he had openly expressed his detestation of the whole lot, and his readiness to fight with any weapon at hand had prevented him from meeting the band in several encounters.

Men may be reckless and quarrelsome, but they find those whom they fear, and Durango Dan had held the Serpents in check even when they had counseled among themselves to put an end to his career.

On the occasion in question he had seen fit to caution Major Midget against resenting the hot words which the Cardinal had thrown into his teeth.

The major had quitted the saloon soon after Rutherford's departure, and the belief was that he would follow the Cardinal before he cooled down and bring on a sanguinary meeting.

"I don't want the red ruffian's life," said the major looking into Durango Dan's face. "The iron knife is in his door. It will be elsewhere by and by."

"But you heard what he said—his defiance?"

"I heard it," and a smile came into the corners of the little man's mouth.

"If Captain Cobra could have been within hearing distance the eyes behind the hood might have got a mad glitter."

"Do you think so, Captain Dan? Did you ever see those eyes?"

"I've seen them."

"Unobserved, of course?"

Durango Dan nodded.

"You have seen them, too, major."

The little man made no reply for a moment, then remarked:

"He called me the file that sharpens the claws of the Carquinez Cat."

"He said that, major."

"Do you know what he meant?"

"I do not."

If Durango Dan expected an explanation and he evidently did, he was disappointed.

Major Midget looked down the narrow street which some distance ahead lost itself among the gold-ribbed hills. He appeared to drop at once into the heart of a mental debate through

which he was closely watched by the man who towered more than two feet above him.

"What have you on the string, Dan?" he asked abruptly.

The answer was prompt enough.

"Nothing."

"Then let me explain why the Cardinal dubbed me Major Midget, the file that sharpens the Cat's claws when they need it," said the little man.

Major Midget led the way to a strongly-built cabin near the end of the street above mentioned. There was not the slightest appearance of luxury about the premises beyond a mass of sweet-smelling vines that covered the front of the logs with a wild profusion of leaf and flower.

"We don't want a light," laughed Major Midget when he had shut the door. "A tale is for the ear, not for the eye, and the darkness will serve my purpose just as well as the strongest light. The Cardinal didn't mean to be funny when he applied the singular name to me, but he made me smile all the same."

A moment's silence, during which Durango Dan said nothing, followed Major Midget's pause.

"I never mix in any one's love affairs," soon continued the same voice in the dark. "If I did I would interfere in the one the Carquinez Cat has on hand just now. The Cat himself is a strange creature, like myself for instance. A long time ago, before either of us knew that we were to inhabit the same camp in this wildcat country, we came together in a remarkable manner."

"I got mixed up in an affair in the canyon country and was creeping along the brink of a pass, all the time listening for a lot of enemies, when I came upon a man hanging by the ends of his fingers along a wall nearly a thousand feet high. A boiling torrent rushed along the bottom of the wall, and a drop would have been certain death. Well, I was hating pretty nearly everybody just then, and my first impulse was to loosen the poor devil's hands and watch him shoot downward to destruction. He was handsome, but at the same time he had the face of a devil."

"Before I had watched him long, I felt merciful, and gently encircling one of his wrists with a stout cord which I carried, I got him out of the awful situation and the canyon river did not get him. Then I learned that he was from Carquinez, and that he had been thrown over the trail by a man whose identity my most adroit questioning could not draw from him."

"From that night I date my acquaintance with Don Caddo the Carquinez Cat. You see I sharpened his claws by saving him from a drop into the torrent, in other words sharpened his claws as the Red Cardinal would say."

"Since then you have been friends?" said Durango Dan.

"Not exactly friends, nor altogether enemies," was the reply.

"Once since I warned Don Caddo against the Silver Serpents, again filing his claw, ha, ha!"

The little man's laugh sounded strangely in the gloom that filled the cabin from garret to floor.

"Why had Don Caddo been thrown from the trail and left to disappear in the river?" queried Durango Dan.

"He never told me, but his silence excited my curiosity a little, and I accordingly investigated. Did you ever hear of one Colonel Midas?"

"What! the nabob who a few years ago was the central figure of the newly opened Shasta country?"

"The same."

"Colonel Midas had pitted against him a league of desperate men. He was said to have gained his wealth by having come across a diagram which had been drawn by one of the old Spanish Jesuits who lived in California before the coming of the American. At any rate Colonel Midas who well deserved the name seemed to turn into gold every thing he touched. One night he disappeared. He was seen to enter one of his mines which contained a buried river like the one which flows beneath this shanty and it is said that he never came out."

"As a matter of course the whole Shasta country became excited. The men in his employ—his gold slaves—hunted high and low for him. He did not come back, and at last his possessions passed into other hands, but not without bloodshed. Men fought like tigers for Colonel Midas's wealth. They inaugurated a reign of terror through the district. The Outs killed the Ins and the Ins in turn hunted the Outs to the wall."

"This went on for more than three years. The disappearance of Colonel Midas and the fight for his bonanzas make up the bloodiest page in the history of Shasta-land. By and by the mine which he had entered that night gave up its dead."

"Dead, was he?" ejaculated Durango Dan, who had not let a syllable of Major Midget's narrative escape him.

"He went away a living Apollo; he came back a mummy."

"A mummy? How?"

"His body, strangely preserved by the air of

the mine, was found by some adventurous man who brought it forth. A broken dagger was in the hardened breast, a rich ring, known everywhere as his, was found on the skeleton hand, and in the mouth was a silver button. That is the way Colonel Midas, the Shasta nabob, came back to his parceled wealth. The corpse was pitched into a grave on the mountain and forgotten."

"What became of his family?"

Durango Dan heard a laugh in the dark, and a hand suddenly found his wrist and closed there.

"His family, eh?" said Major Midget. "Who told you he had one?"

"I may have guessed it."

"Ho! is that it?" exclaimed the little man, and the hand fell off. "Colonel Midas had a wife, but she never saw the Shasta city. There had been a separation, but the whys and wherefores of it did not concern the tough citizens there. Now I come back to my friend Don Caddo. I have discovered that he was suspected of having killed Colonel Midas, and that some vengeance-hunter threw him over the canyon wall. Now he is among us—one of us, so to speak. He is hated by the Red Cardinal and the Serpents. They have driven him to the wall more than once, but his knife holds them at bay. He is making love to Dolores—"

"To Dolores!" cried Durango Dan, almost bounding to his feet.

"Ay, to Dolores!"

"It would be a union of hawk and dove."

"So it would, Captain Dan."

"I'd as soon see the girl wed his Satanic Majesty!"

"Or the Cardinal, eh?"

"No, not that!" exclaimed the big man. "I'd draw the line there."

"In favor of the devil?"

"Yes."

The hand in the dark came back to Durango Dan's wrist; a pair of lips touched his ear.

That which they said caused the big pard to spring erect.

CHAPTER XI.

THE HOODED FACE IN SANTA LEO.

MAJOR MIDGET must have whispered a terrible secret of some kind, for a cry of astonishment parted Durango Dan's lips. It echoed for half a second amid the gloom of the cabin, and then died away.

Five minutes afterward the two men came forth and stood together for a moment in the dim starlight.

The great difference in their physiques was observable even there, for Dan was the giant of the camp, larger still than the Red Cardinal, and the smallest man within its boundaries was the little major.

The couple separated with an exchange of good-nights, and soon afterward the figure of Major Midget might have been seen gliding from the camp and losing itself among the mountains.

The major was quick in his movements, and not many minutes had elapsed when he appeared on a certain spot far above Santa Leo.

"He may not come, but there may be something in the post-office," said Major Midget aloud. "Nobody has tracked me from camp—I've been too watchful for that. The Cardinal has other schemes in the wind, and the iron blade in his door gives him more concern than he lets on."

The little man dodged into what appeared to be an opening in the solid mountain-wall, but did not altogether disappear.

Drawing his nimble body upward by means of bushes, he plunged his hand into a dark place and clutched something which he drew forth with an exclamation of delight.

It proved to be a piece of paper folded and rather rudely sealed with wax, and Major Midget withdrew to one side and struck a match. Screened from observation by an overhanging rock, he broke the seal and opened the note.

"This is two days old!" exclaimed the little man from Santa Leo, with a disappointed look as his eyes devoured the lines before him, which ran as follows:

"MY DEAR MAJOR:—"

"Keep your eyes open and see whether the iron blade frightens the Red Cardinal when he finds it in his door. Don't let the Serpents break over Don Caddo's knife if you can prevent. And keep an eye on the yield of the mines, so as to give a fair estimate when one is demanded. CAPTAIN COBRA."

There was an amused twinkle in Major Midget's eyes when they looked up from the paper in the light of his match.

"The iron knife troubles the Cardinal," he laughed, as if the writer of the letter stood before him. "He keeps a bold front and defies you, captain. You will find him guarded by his Serpents when you come, and the intention is to shoot your hood away and expose the face the crowd wants to get a look at. As for Don Caddo, he is quite able to take care of himself, though the Red Cardinal says I have sharpened the Cat's claws for the last time. The mines are yielding enormously. Sam Shott has ordered Durango Dan to sink another shaft in the Starved

Wolf. It is the greatest bonanza in California, as time will show. That would be my report, Captain Cobra, if you were here to receive it, but as you are not—"

Major Midget dropped his match and fell back against the wall with a gasp, for he had seen the hooded figure of the man of mystery in his path!

Captain Cobra had come upon the scene like one appearing from the ground, and he now stood before the astonished major with his arms folded on his ample chest, and his eyes scintillating like twin stars beneath the somber hood.

For a moment the little man of Santa Leo stood irresolute against the rock, but all at once he started forward and halted in front of Captain Cobra.

"I've heard your report, major," said the unseen lips. "It is good enough so far as it goes. What does the Cardinal say?"

"Besides affecting to treat the knife and paper with derision he invites you to Santa Leo."

"Prepared, eh?" laughed Captain Cobra.

"He says he is."

"The fool! I've dealt with such before. How goes Don Caddo's game?"

"Don Caddo's?"

"Yes."

"Which one?"

"Has the Cat two strings to his bow?"

"More than that, perhaps."

"Well, how goes his play for a wife?"

A laugh was Major Midget's first response.

"He has some trumps against him," said he.

"In the Cardinal's hand?"

"Yes."

"It is wolf and wolf. I know the whole pack. Has Don Caddo played any card since the tragedy?"

"You know about it, then?"

"I know. Go on, major."

"He has thrown none since that I know of."

"Where is the Carquinez Cat?"

"He must be at his mine. He is at this hour unless he is risking his dust at the Cold Deck. He wasn't there when I came away."

Captain Cobra did not speak again for a moment.

"Major, my boy," he said, a tinge of merriment in his voice as he looked over the little man before him from head to foot. "You are a keen observer. You have eyes that see about everything that goes on. I have never found you remiss in your duty. Don't they suspect you?"

Major Midget shook his head.

"Make sure of it," continued Captain Cobra.

"I've played it too fine for them," said he.

"If you were suspected of having any communication with me you're life wouldn't be worth the rock you're standing on."

"You are right, it would not," answered the major, meeting the keen eyes behind the hood.

"I want you to realize the danger which surrounds the man who in any way serves Captain Cobra. I'm glad you know what that service means. Now I'm going down into Santa Leo."

Major Midget uttered a strange cry.

"As I've said, they want you to come!" he exclaimed.

"I'm going to accommodate them. What has the Red Cardinal done with the iron knife?"

"It remains where you left it."

"In his door, eh?"

"In his door."

"The time allotted by the warning will soon expire."

"Yes."

"Don't you know that I live up to my bargains?"

"That is the reputation you have."

"Come, let us go."

The little sport of Santa Leo looked curiously at the man of mystery.

"You doubt me, major," he went on, dropping his hand upon Midget's shoulder as he spoke. "Why shouldn't I go down into Santa Leo, where some of the worst devils out of doors hold forth? Why should a lot of men who call themselves the Silver Serpents keep back Captain Cobra, the Mysterious? I've had dealings with their equals in coolness and ferocity. Ha, ha! I let nothing turn me from my path."

"The path of vengeance, eh?"

"There! It isn't the first time you have put that question," laughed Captain Cobra. "If it will do you any good I will say, the path of vengeance! They wait for me, do they?"

"They're not asleep, captain."

"I don't want them to sleep."

Captain Cobra turned toward the mountain camp which was several hundred feet below the strange post-office and watched its tiny lights for some time in silence.

Major Midget standing aloof looked at the man of mystery and seemed to wonder, as he had done many times before, who and what he was.

"I guess all of them are yonder!" suddenly broke Captain Cobra, throwing a look at his companion.

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Of course not," was the reply. "Which is the best path down?"

Major Midget no longer doubted that Captain Cobra intended to enter the camp at the foot of

the gold peaks, and the next moment he offered his services as guide.

He now discovered that the hooded man was without a horse or at least none showed up as they descended the trail and for some time neither spoke a word.

"Are the shanties occupied to-night as when the map was made?" suddenly asked Captain Cobra.

"They are."

"And did Madam Marcia die in the underground office?"

"She did."

A few more steps brought the pair to the first house.

"You can go," resumed Captain Cobra, holding out his hand to the major.

"Are you going to remain?" queried the little man falling back a step.

"For a time at least."

The eyes of Major Midget wandered to the person visible beneath the hood.

He saw no sign of a weapon of any kind. If the dreaded iron blade of the mysterious Californian was about him it was deeply concealed, and the little man did not doubt that it was near.

When the hands of the two men fell apart Major Midget walked away, but soon afterward threw a furtive glance over his shoulder.

He saw the hooded figure of Captain Cobra standing where he had left it, more mysterious than ever as it was revealed by the vague starlight.

"Death has come to Santa Leo afoot," mentally ejaculated the major, as he moved on. "I wouldn't have that masked hound on my trail for the wealth of a dozen Indies. It is strange how he took me into his confidence; but yet he has never trusted me with the slightest glimpse of his face. I have no more idea who he is than the man in the moon, and I know that that individual knows nothing about him."

When Major Midget looked again at the finish of his last observation he saw nothing of the Mystery that had come to Santa Leo, and within the next three minutes he walked up to a bar and steadied his nerves with a draught of the fieriest liquor in the mountain town.

The reader may imagine the state of feverish excitement in which the little sport awaited developments in the drama of which he was a part.

He went from the saloon to his shanty, and for some time paced its hard floor in the gloom, listening to hear the outbreak of a tumult.

More than an hour passed. The night was wearing away.

Each succeeding minute seemed to increase the tension that threatened to snap the little man's nerves.

"In God's name, I can't stand this!" cried he.

"Where is Captain Cobra?"

He sprang to the door and threw it open.

As he did so the sharp report of a six-shooter awoke the echoes of the night, and then everything was terribly still.

CHAPTER XII.

A LION AMONG TIGERS.

OF course Major Midget believed that the startling shot was in some way connected with the presence in camp of Captain Cobra.

He stood in the narrow doorway of his shanty, and waited for further developments. None came.

The silence seemed to grow more intense, and unable to endure it longer the major started out to investigate.

All of a sudden he saw before him and barely ten feet away the figure of a man whose proportions were gigantic.

It was a larger figure than Captain Cobra's, more like the Red Cardinal's or Durango Dan's.

It appeared to lean against the end of a cabin, and though Major Midget watched it several minutes he did not see it move.

At last, to end the suspense, and get at the bottom of the mystery, the dwarf sport slipped forward.

His footfalls did not alarm the man at the shanty.

"My God! dead for a thousand!" exclaimed Major Midget, and a moment later he was staring into the white face of the man he had separated from a short time before—Durango Dan!

The revolver-shot was now explained.

It had taken the life of the California giant, for the very attitude of the victim told that he had fallen against the logs, and died without a struggle.

There was something about his discovery which seemed to rivet Major Midget to the spot.

"I don't believe he did it!" he exclaimed. "Captain Cobra came to Santa Leo for another man's life. I don't know that Durango Dan was his enemy, though the hand of the man of mystery seems to be against every man. He uses the iron knife—the silent weapon which he knows so well how to use—not the loud-talking, though deadly revolver. There'd be a time in camp if they should catch Captain Cobra, and find Durango Dan with a bullet in his heart. By Jericho! I don't want 'em to find me here,"

and the little man drew back and left the corpse leaning against the dark cedar logs, strangely stiffening there, with the pale star-beams falling upon his rough face.

But another discovery, as startling as the major's, had followed with lightning rapidity upon the heels of the first.

It was made by another man, and in another part of the camp.

Major Midget was again called suddenly from his cabin, but this time by a number of voices in the dark street, and then he heard the beat of rapid feet, and knew that Santa Leo had been suddenly stirred to its depths.

"They have found him! They have discovered the dead body of Durango Dan!" he exclaimed.

In a moment he was confronted by a man whom he knew well.

"The fox is in a trap, major!" cried the man, with a laugh. "I guess the iron blade has found its last heart. He was a fool to come into Santa Leo. Haven't you heard?"

"I have heard nothing."

"Not even the shot awhile ago?"

"I heard something like one, but—"

"Thought it was a fight at the Cold Deck, eh?" broke in the sport.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Certainly; of course. But let's see what he looks like. They'll take the mask off now."

Major Midget stepped back.

"Have they caught Cobra?" he exclaimed.

"They have him! The Cardinal was too slick for the hooded hawk o' Californy."

"Where is he?"

"At the Cold Deck. Oh, if you don't want to go down I'll go alone," and the man darted away leaving the little major alone.

It was most startling news.

What! Captain Cobra a prisoner in Santa Leo?

Major Midget knew what that meant if it were true.

He let five minutes pass before he left the shanty, and then he stole swiftly toward the Cold Deck Saloon with all his quickened senses on the alert.

Already the crowd had come.

The wide doorway was black with men and a glance inside told him that the interior was in a similar condition.

Major Midget was anxious to see the prisoner, but at the same time he wanted to escape observation himself.

A look by Captain Cobra might betray the acquaintanceship existing between them and the little man was anxious to prevent anything of this sort.

As he neared the saloon the crowd at the door suddenly parted and with a thrill that seemed to freeze his very marrow he caught sight of a majestic but hooded figure in the center of the lighted bar-room.

There had been no false report. Captain Cobra the man with the iron knife had fallen into the hands of his worst enemies.

The sight of him surrounded by the dark-faced citizens of Santa Leo was startling enough for Midget.

The little man began to single out the men by whom the prisoner was watched.

He saw the Silver Serpents on every hand but the chiefest of all—the man who was their acknowledged leader the Red Cardinal stood where every eye could see him.

The triumph of Rutherford was undisguised.

It shone in his eyes and was seen in the smile that lurked in the red beard which looked more fiery than ever.

Major Midget could not have fled from this scene if he had desired to. It held him in its magic grip and he found himself standing at the door awaiting results.

"Gentlemen, the masked murderer of the mountains stands before you!" exclaimed the Red Cardinal fixing his gaze anew upon Captain Cobra who with folded arms was looking calmly at the crowd through the eye-holes of his hood.

"The pitcher which goes often to the well gets broken at last. Captain Cobra came into camp either to post another warning or carry out the threat in the one on my door. It is immaterial which. Some of you heard the shot which broke the silence of the night awhile ago. You know that the corpse that will soon be placed before you tells the story of that death-shot. Captain Cobra stands yonder charged by me with the cold-blooded murder of Durango Dan!"

"For once he left the iron knife and sent a bullet into the heart of the man who was found dead against Cabin 29. For the knife in my door I care nothing. You know that I have defied the man of mystery—laughing at the warning and threat, and feeling myself able to cope single-handed with Captain Cobra."

Everybody expected to see the prisoner of the camp step toward the Red Cardinal and throw a fierce reply into his teeth.

Anything less than this would have been the sorest of disappointments.

Instead of such a scene the arrowy figure of the hooded mystery straightened and the head went proudly up. His body turned until he stood fairly face to face with the Red Cardinal.

"Captain Cobra has touched no trigger in

Santa Leo to-night," came through the hood. "The tongue which accuses him of the death of Durango Dan is as false as its owner is base! The Red Cardinal knows that the big man of Santa Leo did not die at Captain Cobra's hands."

"Shot for shot," was whispered behind Rutherford until his cheeks flushed redder than his beard.

"By the gods! he plays a cool game!" cried the Red Cardinal. "If he dares stand trial he shall have it fair and above-board, for, more merciful than he has been, we will give the mystery of the hills a chance on this one charge."

If the eyes behind the hood were any index to the hidden face a smile must have crossed it at the Cardinal's words.

At this moment a man brushed Major Midget at the door, and stepped upon the threshold.

"Sam Shott, the bonanza boss!" muttered the little sport, and then he eyed the newcomer, who was looking at Captain Cobra with astonishment and wonder traceable on every line of his handsome face.

"Make him take off his hood!" came suddenly from the crowd behind Captain Cobra.

The prisoner kept to his tracks, and did not look back.

The suggestion promised to swell into a clamor. It was heard on every side.

"Will he do it?" thought Major Midget. "Will he uncover the face which has been hidden for years? They can take the hood off for him, but his eyes say that he won't do it himself."

Fifty hands were itching to grasp the ends of the mask, and throw it back over the face of its mysterious owner, yet not one seemed willing to take the initiative.

"What's a man against a crowd like us?" suddenly cried a rough voice, and the stalwart figure of Braddock, the hot-head, stepped to the front. "We want to see who we have here before we call the jury and open court. Captain Cobra has been a living mystery long enough. It is time we saw behind his hood, and marked the man who has blazed his way through California with his infernal iron blade!"

Braddock went toward the man in the middle of the floor.

He seemed to be biting his lips through, in order not to betray his full feelings.

The two men faced each other in the light, with less than six feet between them.

Braddock was determined to unmask the man whom he had shot on the trail above the camp.

He was on the eve of throwing himself upon Captain Cobra.

There would be a struggle, the eyes behind the mask said this much, but their glitter, as their owner waited for the Hotspur of Santa Leo, did not promise to deter him.

"Take it off!" cried the voice of Braddock, leveling a dark finger at the hood.

There was no reply.

"Reveal yourself to the men you have tried to terrorize so long!" continued the stalwart hot-head. "Remove the mask that hides your face, or by the God overhead! the hand of Braddock of Santa Leo will dash it to the floor for you!"

A dead silence followed the last mad word of the swarthy, wild-eyed speaker.

All saw Braddock throw one foot back. They saw his clinched hands open and his lips come together for the bound.

In another second there would have been an encounter of the most exciting nature if a new man had not appeared upon the scene.

"Captain Cobra has rights even here!" cried a loud voice. "I forbid any man in my employ touching him without my consent."

Braddock turned and glared like a tiger-cat at the speaker.

It was Sam Shott.

CHAPTER XIII.

CAPTAIN COBRA'S BEQUEST.

THE bonanza man of Santa Leo exhibited no excitement as he issued the command which had just fallen upon the ears of the tough crowd.

Captain Cobra looked at the interferer with no sign of emotion in the cool eyes behind the hood.

If anything, he seemed to regret that the orders had halted Braddock in his hot-headed designs, for the man of mystery had quietly braced himself for the encounter.

The Red Cardinal, who was watching with delight for the promised collision, looked at Shott and frowned; the crowd with very few exceptions followed his example.

Everybody knew the nabob of the Santa Barbara Hills.

"You've been as eager as we have to see beyond that mask!" growled Braddock, pointing at Captain Cobra while he looked at Shott.

"Silence!" said the bonanza king. "I have said that Captain Cobra has rights even here. If he refuses to unmask, what authority have we to compel him?"

"We don't want to try a man who is afraid to let his face be seen."

"When the time comes Captain Cobra will

remove his hood. I believe it. I am willing to wait."

"Let him remain hooded," put in Rutherford. "We won't press that point now. The prisoner is charged with the killing of Durango Dan. If he gives his parole of honor that he will not give us the slip, he will not be compelled to answer before to-morrow."

All eyes were turned to Captain Cobra.

"You can have that," came from behind the hood. "I don't see why I should run away."

"To-morrow, then. The Court of Santa Leo will convene under this roof at ten o'clock."

Sam Shott looked at the speaker, but said nothing.

"The Red Cardinal, backed by his Serpents, is playing a cool hand for absolute power," thought he. "We will see how the game pans out. I don't believe Captain Cobra guilty, but we'll attend to that when we come to it."

It having been agreed that at ten o'clock the following day the hooded man should be tried for the mysterious murder of Durango Dan, Sam Shott walked from the saloon followed by Major Midget, who had watched the exciting scenes of the last few moments with breathless interest.

The sharp eyes of the little man fairly snapped. He saw Shott enter his own house and close the door behind him.

Stepping among the shadows that lay near, the major was debating what to do when a footstep fell upon his ears and he saw the figure of Captain Cobra on the steps.

"I must see him now. I must tell him what sort of game they'll set up against him to-night," muttered Major Midget, and the next second he appeared at the masked man's side and his fingers fastened on his arm.

"You here?" exclaimed Captain Cobra, looking down upon the person whom he had lately encountered at the mountain post-office.

"Why not?" grinned the major. "I know it's worth my hide to be seen with you in Santa Leo, but I'll take my chances. It's a cold deck, eh?"

The dark hood coming down toward the major nearly touched his face.

"I've met them before," said the unseen lips in whispers. "What proof have they?"

Major Midget shook his head.

"I'd bet my scalp they have none—nothing fair," he answered. "It's a trumped-up charge. You don't use the six-shooter. The iron knife is your friend and trade mark."

"Yes," replied Captain Cobra. "The iron blade is my weapon. Did you hear the shot?"

"I did."

"And saw—"

"Nothing."

"Then you don't know who killed Durango Dan?"

"I do not, but a thousand to ten that you didn't."

"Thanks, major," returned the man with the hood. "I did not see Don Caddo at the saloon."

Major Midget started slightly.

"Where is the Carquinez Cat?"

The little man was compelled to shake his head.

"Could you find him?" continued Captain Cobra.

"When?"

"Between now and the hour set for my trial."

"I don't know."

"Try," said the strange man, eagerly.

"Does he know—"

"Don't question me. Find Don Caddo. He may be at his mine. Didn't you tell me that the Red Cardinal lately boasted that you had sharpened the Cat's claws for the last time?"

"Yes."

"What did he mean?"

"I can't say."

"Very well. Go and find the Carquinez Cat. I am here to fight this thing out with them. Captain Cobra will be on deck to-morrow. The tribunal manipulated by the Red Cardinal may prove the hottest iron he has ever had in his hands. Now, major, silence and duty!"

Without giving the little man time to respond the man of mystery turned to Sam Shott's door, opened it without ceremony and walked in.

"He gets deeper as a puzzle the more you have to do with him," said the major to himself, while he walked away. "What under heavens does he want with Don Caddo? Does he need the Cat's claws in this hornets' nest? I'll do my best. I'll find the man from Carquinez if I can."

Meantime Captain Cobra had come face to face with Sam Shott.

The young bonanza boss had started a little at sight of the hood in his house, but he soon recovered and looked curiously into the eyes that shone in the light of his lamp.

He could not but recall his adventure among the mountains, where for a moment he had seen the face now masked—had looked upon the dreaded countenance of mystery and power.

"In the first place, a thousand thanks," said Captain Cobra, touching Shott's arm. "You probably saved one of your mine bosses a twinge of pain."

"What would you have done with Basil?"

"Nothing much," and there seemed a bit of humor in the voice. "I intended to defend myself, and if Braddock had fallen against the

counter with a twisted neck it would have been his own fault. I did not intend to use the iron blade on him. That is for my enemies."

"But Basil shot you on the mountains."

"That is nothing. At the time and for a while afterward I had it in for your bonanza boss, but if he doesn't transgress too far we will get along. But enough of this. I have thanked you for the interference?"

"Yes, but I don't deserve anything for what I did. As I told the crowd you have rights here."

"A right to have a mock trial and stretch hemp, eh?"

"No, not that."

Captain Cobra did not speak for a moment.

His eyes lost their twinkie of merriment and suddenly grew serious.

"I must be to you, Captain Sam Shott, what I am to other men," said he. "I am a man who hunts his fellow-men with an iron knife—who pins a warning to their cabin doors with the bowie which some hours later is found in their hearts. I am a bloodthirsty merciless wretch who rides over the country hooded, killing like a madman without distinction! Isn't that your ideal portrait of Captain Cobra?"

"It is the generally accepted portrait," replied the young nabob.

"I thought so," laughed the man of mystery. "I know how to paint myself you see. Captain Shott, where did you come from?"

The suddenness of the question surprised the American.

"If it is a secret don't let me rob you," quickly replied Captain Cobra.

"It is no secret. I came from St. Louis."

"Born there?"

"Yes."

"But you have been a long time in California?"

"Fifteen years."

"You came hither young?"

"Yes, a stripling who wanted to make a stake in a short time."

"You succeeded?"

"No, I failed; that is, I lost in all my first ventures. What I have I've fought for dollar for dollar."

"How many mines have you?"

"Nine."

"All good ones?"

"We call them so."

Sam Shott wondered what his hooded visitor was aiming at, but he did not try to put an end to the inquisition. It might lead to something that would help to solve the mystery which surrounded Captain Cobra.

"Do you balance your books the first of every month?" suddenly queried the man of mystery.

"I do," answered Shott, still more surprised.

"This is the twelfth. Can I see the last balance?"

The American looked into the eyes behind the hood in utter amazement.

"Remember, you are not compelled to accommodate me in the slightest degree," said Captain Cobra. "I leave you free to do as you please. I would like to see the balance—"

"You shall see it."

Sam Shott crossed the room and took from an iron safe, which had had a slow journey over miles of mountains, a ponderous ledger which he carried to the table.

As he opened it he saw his visitor bend forward eager to inspect the account of his (Shott's) riches.

"The aggregate balance is struck here, you see," said the American, pointing to some writing in a beautiful hand at the foot of a page.

Captain Cobra looked closely for a few seconds. His eyes ran up the page and then down again.

"You're no beggar, Sam Shott!" he suddenly exclaimed, glancing up into the mine-king's face.

"No," smiled Sam. "I'm a little better off than some others who are perhaps more deserving."

"No apologies," and the hooded face seemed to smile, for the eyes twinkled again.

Without another word he seated himself at the table and caught up a pen that rested on an ink-rack above a bronzed bottle.

The next moment he wrote rapidly at the foot of the monthly balance, and when he had finished he pushed the paper toward the man who looked on.

Sam Shott to his astonishment read as follows:

"I give unconditionally to Captain Shott, of Santa Leo, the nine mines he now operates within the district. Signed: CAPTAIN COBRA."

Sam Shott fell back with:

"In God's name, what do you mean?"

"Just what I've written there," was the answer.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MAJOR'S HUNT.

SAM SHOTT'S gaze wandered to the singular bequest.

He read it again and then resought the eyes which were looking steadily at him.

"I would like to know when the mines became your property?" he at last exclaimed.

"When did they become yours, Captain Shott?" was the retort, but not angrily.

The mine-boss of Santa Leo was nonplused, but he did not keep quiet long.

"I've held nearly all of them more than five years," he replied.

"That is right; you've 'held' them. I am not slow to acknowledge a favor. You did me one to-night, for I did not want to have to twist Pard Braddock's neck. The mines are yours. That paper makes them over to you."

"Yes, but—"

"They were mine," broke in Captain Cobra. "I would not have made them over to you if I had not had a clear right to all. You've been working all this time in another's vineyard; but, it's all right now, Captain Shott. Perhaps you'd better take the paper. It might be of service to you in the near future, or before the game is played out."

"What game?"

"The game of Iron Knife and Red Beard!"

Shott picked up Captain Cobra's writing and held it in view while he looked at the man of mystery.

He saw him quit the chair and stand erect.

"Are you going to let them try you to-morrow?" queried the bonanza king.

"Why not? Captain Cobra has never turned his back upon a foe."

"The trial won't be fair."

"Of course not," was the response, and the words came laughingly through the hood. "I am not unacquainted with California courts which are organized to convict. The Cardinal will be in his element to-morrow, won't he?"

"He will control everything."

"So much the better."

Captain Cobra took a step toward the door.

He had, through the whole scene, acted with a coolness that surprised the young American.

"We'll meet later on," the hooded man went on, with one hand touching the knob, while he looked over his shoulder at Shott.

"At the trial?"

"At the trial if not sooner. Good-night!" and the man of mystery passed out, and the one left behind heard the outer door let him into the street.

For some seconds Sam Shott stood bewildered at the table, clutching the few lines which had conveyed to him the mines he had owned and worked for years. It was a strange case, and the more he reflected the deeper grew the puzzle.

If he had had a confidant he might have gone to him, but the American mine-king had never taken any one fully into his confidence.

Among all his men he could not go to one with the paper and ask him what he thought of it.

Sam Shott was still in a reflective mood when a light knock caused him to raise his head, and before he could respond the door opened, and another visitor stood before him.

It was Dolores.

The girl was very beautiful, but she trembled and was deathly pale.

"My God! what will happen next?" burst from her as she came forward and sunk into the chair just vacated by Captain Cobra.

"What has happened?" asked Shott, covering the hooded chief's bequest with his hands.

"I have seen the dread Mystery of the hills," gasped the girl. "As I live, he came out of this house."

A smile passed over the mine-king's face.

"He was here, Dolores," he said. "Captain Cobra occupied that chair a few minutes ago—"

Dolores was on her feet, and, paler than ever, had stepped away.

"Who is he, and why has he come?" she suddenly exclaimed.

Sam Shott shook his head.

"What! he has been here and you know nothing? Was he looking at the ledger?" and Dolores pointed at the heavy ledger still lying on the table, with the balance page in full view just as Captain Cobra had left it.

"He asked to see the last balance sheet," replied the mine-owner, looking closely to see how his words would affect the girl.

"What was his business?"

"There you have me again," laughed Shott.

"Did he ask who balanced the accounts?"

"No."

Dolores seemed relieved.

"I was so near him out yonder that I could have touched him," she continued. "My heart stood still, and I felt my blood congeal in my veins. I never expected to stand so near to the scourge who hunts hearts with an iron blade. Has he come for the red rough, in whose door he left his knife a few hours ago? Did he kill Durango Dan, who was found dead, I'm told, leaning against Cabin Twenty-nine? My mother is scarcely cold before Captain Cobra presents himself in Santa Leo on one of his terrible missions. In some manner he seems to be connected with my mother's history. I can't tell you how, Captain Shott. I am all unstrung. The blow that was dealt me when she died, will always be felt. Captain Cobra, the mysterious, is in some way identified with my existence."

"Impossible!" cried Shott, gazing toward Dolores.

"We feel things that we can't explain," was the response. "You don't know who I am. My mother was 'Madam Marcia,' and beyond her name all was dark to you. Isn't this true?"

"It is true," confessed the mine-owner.

"Madam Marcia had a past over which she dropped the curtain a long time ago. She would not lift it at my importunities, and they were many."

"But, this Captain Cobra?" said Shott, impatiently. "How came you to get the idea that he is connected with your life?"

Dolores sprung toward the American, and caught his arm.

"I've seen his hood at my window before to-night," she cried.

"You? When?"

"When my mother was a sheeted corpse on her cot. He came up like a specter, and, for some minutes, his dark eyes watched her like a serpent's. He did not see me, who saw him through the half-open door of my own little chamber. I have kept my secret until now. Yes, Captain Cobra looked in upon my dead mother, and when I staggered to the door, and looked out, he had disappeared. Now, tell me not that he is not connected with my existence!"

"Ah!" said Shott. "Perhaps your father—"

"Who is my father?" cried the Angel of Santa Leo. "Tell me that, and we two may cut the stubborn knot, and unwind the skein. I know nothing about my father. Madam Marcia never mentioned him in my presence, and a search of the office in the mine reveals nothing. Some hand has plundered it since her death. I happened to find there an old newspaper—one published years and years ago, from which had been partly cut an account of the finding of the corpse of a man named Colonel Midas."

Sam Shott was seen by Dolores to give a quick start.

"What surprises you?" asked the girl. "Did you know Colonel Midas?"

"I have heard of him."

"Well, the paper I found said that he had been missing a long time when at last discovered. He was murdered. The blade of a dagger was found in the almost mummified body; but why did Madam Marcia keep the paper among her treasure?"

Sam Shott did not know.

"They have caught Captain Cobra," he went on, "and to-morrow he may have a chance to confess whether he is connected with your life or not."

"Who have caught him?"

"The Cardinal and his band. Captain Cobra is now out on a parole of honor."

Dolores gave Shott a look of almost incredible wonder.

"Then the career of the iron knife will terminate ere long?" she remarked.

"Of course the Silver Serpents won't neglect this opportunity to sting."

"When do they try Captain Cobra?"

"To-morrow."

"At what hour?"

"At ten."

"They must be keen to see the features behind the hood," resumed Dolores, and then she added, smiling: "I'd like to see them myself."

Five minutes later the beauty of Santa Leo found herself again in her own little cabin.

She passed to her bedroom and lit a lamp.

"I fear I can't pick up a link until after the trial," she murmured. "The murderer of my mother shall be brought to justice and punished by the hand of the daughter! Captain Cobra by falling into the hands of his enemies has turned me aside from the trail for a few moments; but still I can watch. This man of mystery has used his iron blade for the last time unless he takes advantage of his parole. Will he do it? or will he stay peaceably in the tigers' den and face the beasts to-morrow?"

Dolores fell to looking at several small objects which she took from one corner of the room. Among them was a silver button which fairly glittered in the light reflecting as it were her look of intense curiosity.

All at once the door behind her opened softly, but still with noise enough to make her turn.

"You? Don't you ever knock?" she cried, gazing reprovingly at the little man, who stood in the doorway.

"Sometimes, Dolores," was the reply, and Major Midget came forward with an apologetic grin. "I don't intend to bore you with my presence. I want you to take possession of my will."

He held out a folded paper as he spoke, and the girl drew back with an expression of mingled surprise and fear.

"Don't fear to hold it. I'm not leaving much for them to quarrel over; and you won't have trouble in carrying out the last will and testament of Major Midget."

"Why did you make it?" queried Dolores.

"I'm going away."

"From Santa Leo?"

"Not exactly, but maybe I'll not come back."

Major Midget saw the puzzled look that overspread the girl's face.

"I'll tell you," he explained. "You're one

of the few who can be trusted with a secret. You know they've caught Captain Cobra, the Hooded Mystery?"

"Yes."

"That they're going to try him to-morrow at ten?"

"I know that, too."

"Well, Dolores, I'm going after Don Caddo, the Carquinez Cat."

"For whom?"

Major Midget's voice sunk to a whisper.

"For Captain Cobra," said he.

"And where is Don Caddo?"

"I'm of the opinion that he's taken a voyage down the underground Styx, and I'm going to the end of it but what I find him!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE TRAIL OF THE STYX.

LET us for a time follow the adventurous little man who, with the utmost coolness, has just notified Dolores of his intention to seek Don Caddo among the windings of Santa Leo's underground river.

The somewhat mystified girl watched him out of sight—a task easy of accomplishment, as heavy clouds had darkened the sky, and his figure was dwarfish in its proportions.

"She's got my last will and testament if I never come back," chuckled Major Midget, thinking of Dolores and the document he had placed in her keeping. "She'll be surprised when she breaks the seal and opens it, but I won't give her an opportunity if I can help it. Don Caddo must be found. Captain Cobra wants him—Heaven knows for what—and if I can find him this side of the grave, it shall be done."

Major Midget returned to his shanty from which he soon emerged and started toward the mines where he disappeared from human view beyond the mouth of Madam Marcia's bonanza.

What caused the little man of Santa Leo to think that Don Caddo had been consigned to the buried river?

We have heard the Red Cardinal tell him that he had sharpened the Cat's claws for the last time, but there was nothing in look or language that suggested the hidden Styx.

Major Midget was sharp and quick to interpret the hidden meaning of hot words.

He knew the chief of the Silver Serpents almost as well as he knew himself. He had been his shadow when he did not dream that any one was at his heels, for, as Captain Cobra's secret friend, he had kept eyes and ears open a long time in Santa Leo.

Swift work was now the order of the hour.

The night was wearing away and Captain Cobra would soon have to face the bronzed tribunal whose creator was the man in whose door still stuck the iron knife of mystery and revenge.

The result of the coming trial Major Midget did not doubt.

He knew the power of the Red Cardinal and his band. Sam Shott had prevented the removal of Captain Cobra's hood; he had kept Basil the hot-head from colliding with the man of mystery, but the time was coming when his commands would not be obeyed.

"Unless," thought Major Midget when he reached this point, "Unless I can find Don Caddo."

He had no well-defined idea why Captain Cobra wanted to see the Carquinez Cat. Perhaps he wanted to send the iron blade to his heart before the sentence of the mountain court was carried out.

It was a deep puzzle to the major.

Once in the mine with whose dark intricacies he seemed familiar he took a certain path in the gloom and in time reached the bank of the sluggish river.

He took a waxen taper from his pocket and produced a light.

As the flame revealed the water at his feet a smile passed over Major Midget's face.

The bank sloped gradually to the edge of the tide and like a man urged on by overpowering curiosity he went downward holding the light above his head.

There was a narrow space between the water and the bank proper. It was wide enough for a sure-footed man to keep with some difficulty, and in a few moments Major Midget was moving along with his candle reflected in the water on his left.

By and by the bank grew precipitous.

The buried river seemed to lose itself under an arch of dark rock, and the little man halted and looked dubiously ahead.

"I don't know about that," he appeared to be saying to himself. "There's no telling what lies beyond the tunnel. Why not turn back and leave Don Caddo to his fate?"

Despite his serious looks the major plunged into the gaping hole and found himself in a place full of discomfort and very dark.

His candle did not light up any perceivable space, moisture dropped from the roof of the arch, rendering his situation more disagreeable than ever, and the dark flow of the river, now a little swifter, sent a chill to his bones.

"Hang it all," cried the major. "What am I doing this for, anyhow? I don't know who

Captain Cobra is. I'm risking my life for a murdering mystery. Is it right?"

He went on again as if he had answered his own question in the affirmative.

He kept along the side of the passage with the river washing his feet at times, and the ghostly sound of its flowing in his ear.

At last he halted.

He had now reached a spot where further progress seemed to be cut off.

The hidden Styx had disappeared!

The flickering candle showed Major Midget a great opening in the ground, and the whole body of water was rushing into it like a cataract.

For some time the little man stood and eyed this phenomenon.

"If the river loses itself here," said he, "where can I find it again? I know what they say about it; that it comes to the surface again somewhere beyond this point, that there, wherever that place is, it becomes a little lake, though it still has a movement. Madam Marcia used to tell me a good deal about her river, as she called it; but she'll never give me any more information on that point."

Major Midget crawled up the rocky wall that rose above the spot where the buried river had disappeared.

He had stuck his candle into the leather band of his hat and it served the purposes of a miner's light, and showed him the peril of his situation.

An hour later Major Midget stood on a totally different spot.

He faced what appeared to be a lake of unknown dimensions. The water stretched far beyond the reach of his light, and not a ripple stirred its surface.

The little man appeared to shudder at his loneliness.

He had found the river once more. It had come to the surface again after losing itself below the cataract.

Major Midget moved along the bank of the lake, looking closely at the ground and now and then glancing out upon the lake itself.

All at once he halted.

Reaching up he snuffed his taper and enveloped himself in profound darkness.

The following moment he loosened a knife in his belt, and then drew the weapon, holding the blade along his sleeve.

The cause for such action was the sudden glimmer of a light on the water some distance away.

His quick eye had caught it in time to put out his own light before it could betray his position.

Who was on the shore of the lake with him?

Major Midget seemed to hold his breath while he waited for further developments.

By and by the light grew broader on the water.

It approached the major, though he could not see the carrier for the rocks that hid his figure.

It was a moment of suspense for the little sport.

At length the light itself came into view, and he saw the torch which had produced the startling glow.

Major Midget fell back to the rocks behind him.

Still grasping his knife as before, he drew his revolver and glared at the light.

He saw beneath the torch the figure of a man. He leaned forward in his eagerness to see more of it; he was not satisfied with half a view.

The torch-bearer kept near the water. He threw his light as far from him as possible, as though searching the surface of the lake for some object.

All this time he was watched like a cat by Major Midget.

The diminutive body of Santa Leo's dwarf sport was protected by a mass of rock which rose to the ceiling of the cavern. He could watch the underground hunter without much fear of discovery.

Suddenly the man with the torch came toward Major Midget.

He held his torch near the ground, and the little man saw with a thrill of horror that the fire, like a bloodhound, had found his trail toward the rock.

His steps of course were faintly impressed on the ground, but they were plain enough for the searching eyes of the subterranean trailer, whose eyes seemed to blaze in the glow of his torch.

Major Midget's clutch tightened around the butt of his revolver.

"I don't intend to fall into your hands here," said he, eying the man. "I think the same errand brought us hither, but Captain Cobra did not send you."

At this juncture the man with the torch came to a halt.

He seemed to have lost the trail he had followed a short distance.

Major Midget now had an excellent chance to study the stalwart figure as it was revealed by the light. Already he had recognized its owner, but now he saw in full the long red beard of Thor Rutherford, the Red Cardinal.

A hundred mad thoughts rushed through the little major's brain.

What an admirable target the giant presented in the light of his own fire.

A swift bullet would put a new phase on the trial near at hand. It would deprive the Silver Serpents of their leader and probably terminate the reign of the gang.

More than once the major raised the cocked six-shooter.

He held it on a level with the Red Cardinal's breast and glanced savagely along the barrel.

His finger burned to press the trigger, but something held him back.

"He don't belong to me," mentally ejaculated Major Midget. "The iron knife has marked him and I have no right to interfere. He holds Captain Cobra at the mercy of his packed court, though. That is what I don't like. He has come here for a purpose. Is it to find Don Caddo? or does he know that I have invaded Madam Marcia's mine?"

The next moment the Red Cardinal turned half-way round and looked at the lake.

"I don't see him!" he exclaimed, in the major's hearing, and then, turning quickly, he came straight toward the rock.

The flaring torch lit up every crevice. As it ferreted out Captain Cobra's messenger, a little figure sprang forward, and a single word rung throughout the cavern of the lake:

"Halt!"

CHAPTER XVI.

DWARF AND GIANT.

THE torch dropped suddenly from above the Cardinal's head and he stood still.

He saw revealed before him and by his own light the small yet well-proportioned figure of Major Midget, and noticed, too, the coolness with which the revolver was directed at his breast.

Rutherford saw the gleam that lent a wicked dazzle to the little man's eyes, and involuntarily glanced at the finger that seemed eager to press the trigger and break the tableau.

"Didn't expect to find me here, eh?" smiled Major Midget.

"Of course I did not. I wasn't looking for spies," answered the big sport of Santa Leo.

The leveled arm did not drop, and the six-shooter remained steady.

"Where is he, captain?" queried the major.

"Where is who?"

"How innocent you are! Where is he, I ask?"

"I don't know," rejoined Rutherford. "Does that answer you?"

"It may suit you, but it is a clear evasion of the question."

There was no response.

"Captain Rutherford, I recall your last words at the Cold Deck."

"Halt! do you? Then your memory is not defective."

There was a sneer in the Red Cardinal's voice.

"I was told that I had sharpened the claws of the Carquinez Cat for the last time."

"Didn't you believe me, major?"

"I would not be here if I did."

A singular look overspread Rutherford's dark face where the red beard did not touch.

He seemed to take delight in intimating to Major Midget that he had finished the man from Carquinez.

Instead of walking back from the menacing revolver, he stepped toward it and so quickly that the little man in moving toward the rock nearly lost his balance.

"Halt! You have come near enough!" said Major Midget. "Another step and by the eternal heavens! the trial to take place to-morrow will lose one of its most prominent participants. I am little, Captain Thor, but my revolver shoots as hard as yours!"

The big sport did not advance further. He seemed to be satisfied that the menace he had just heard was backed up by a determination which would brook no by-play.

Once more the two enemies stood face to face.

"Let us go back to the lost man," said the major.

"The lost man?" echoed Rutherford.

"To Don Caddo."

"Are you hunting him?"

"I am."

"Have you asked the river?"

It seemed to give the Red Cardinal great delight to speak thus.

"Is the secret in its keeping?"

"Yes!" exclaimed the giant, and he leaned toward Major Midget despite the revolver.

"Why keep the secret any longer? The Cat from Carquinez may have had nine lives, but he has given up the last one. Go and ask the river where he is. Beyond the lake—beyond the limits of this cavern which as you must know is but an extension of Madam Marcia's mine, lost forever to human eye is the carcass of Don Caddo the dark! He has gone on a voyage to the unknown mouth of the subterranean Styx whose water trail you have followed to this point. Now, Major Midget, don't you think you have sharpened the cat's claws for the time? I guess I didn't lie when I flung those words in your teeth at the Cold Deck."

"If the carcass is lost it shall be found," was the response.

"Who wants it?" exclaimed the Red Cardinal, fixing his eyes on the little figure in the light.

"See here, man. I have never attempted to

unmask you. I have allowed you to have an existence among us—to be a citizen of Santa Leo, when a word, the lifting of a finger as it were would have been sufficient to drive you into exile—more than that—to have you wear a hempen necktie by order of the Tribunal."

"You have been very lenient according to your story," sneered the major.

"I have kept your bones from the scavengers of the sky and the wolves of the passes."

"Thanks!" and Major Midget bowed with a sarcastic twinkle in his black eyes. "I haven't known till now the obligations I owe you. Captain Rutherford boasting of mercy! By Jove! the devil will turn priest next!"

The Red Cardinal bit his lip.

"We need not prolong this interview," continued the major.

"Just as you like. But let me say—"

Major Midget who had stepped back with the revolver now hanging along his side gave his enemy a quick look.

"Well, say it," he snapped.

"You haven't come here of your own volition," resumed Rutherford. "Somebody else is at the bottom of your search for Don Caddo."

"How do you know?"

"I know more than you think I do."

"Well, keep your secrets. I don't want them!" ejaculated the little man.

"You won't long survive your master!" hissed the Red Cardinal.

"My master, eh?"

"Yes."

"Who is my master?"

"Step into the Square to-morrow when the Tribunal convenes, and see him there for trial—if he doesn't break his parole like a coward, and slope before daylight!"

"If you mean Captain Cobra, you may prepare to see him in court," retorted Major Midget.

"I mean the masked murderer of the hills!"

The little man gave his burly enemy a look of mingled defiance and contempt, and walked away.

He looked over his shoulder and saw the stalwart figure between him and the lake.

All at once his hand went up—he stopped in his tracks at the same time—and the next second the stunning report of his revolver filled the cavern with a terrible noise.

Myriads of sparks flew in every direction as the pistol spoke, and the torch which had revealed the Red Cardinal to the major was extinguished—literally shot out of existence by the unerring marksmanship of Major Midget!

"I could have extinguished the spark of life just as well," said a voice in the dark, for the scattered portions of the splintered torch gave out no light. "I don't want your blood, Captain Thor. I have no right to take it. That right belongs to another. You and he for it. But, should you attempt to crowd Major Midget, of Santa Leo, rest assured that he will meet you on your own ground, and fight you with the weapon that comes handiest."

If the little speaker could have seen the Red Cardinal at that moment, he might have been more on his guard.

The tall figure of the Red Cardinal was bent forward, and one hand clutched a heavy revolver, while its owner was trying to make out the precise location of the little sport.

But the darkness was too intense and although not more than twenty feet separated the couple they could not catch the faintest glimpse of one another.

"Good-night," said the same voice a moment later. "I shall continue my investigations or cut them short as I see fit. As to me serving a master, that is a charge I need not answer. I am Major Midget of Santa Leo. The shanty I inhabit is my own and will be fought for and held against the Silver Serpents or the packed Tribunal of the Golden State!"

"Grit to the backbone!" mentally ejaculated the Red Cardinal as the last words died away. "The atom of Santa Leo has grit enough for a mountain. I'll net him some other time for the hand I hold here is the best in the deck, and every card is a trump, backed by the Silver Serpents of the bonanza mountains."

The Red Cardinal did not move until he knew that Major Midget had departed.

Whether the little sport had gone back to the trail he had been following underground, or had returned to the camp, he could not tell for the darkness. For the present he did not seek to discover, but instead went back to the lake and followed its shore to the spot where Major Midget had first caught the glimmer of his torch.

There he drew his body up along the ragged wall that seemed to lose itself far overhead.

It was a perilous climb for a man as large as Rutherford, but his clutch was firm and his limbs remarkably agile and in time he was far above the lake crawling down a narrow corridor whose sides he touched nearly all the time.

If a search for Don Caddo who at crack of his six-shooter had dropped backward into the California Styx had brought him back to the mine, his hunt had proved unsuccessful. He had found Major Midget, but not the Carquinez Cat; and fitting moments admonished him that

he was soon to face Captain Cobra in presence of the bronzed Tribunal of Santa Leo.

Beyond the corridor he stood erect in a chamber whose walls he could not touch.

Darkness and silence surrounded him.

The following moment he snapped a lucifer, and started forward.

A wall rose above him.

He saw the dark, almost smooth surface of stone, and moved his match from right to left.

"I often wonder if Madam Marcia did this," he said, looking at some written characters on the smoothest spot. "She was familiar with every part of her mine. She may have put this inscription here, for she must have thought it ten thousand times."

And then the Red Cardinal read under his breath:

"The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind the entire grist!"

CHAPTER XVII.

INFORMATION AND ADVICE.

SAM SHOTT, the young American bonanza king of Santa Leo, had not retired, though the hour of midnight had passed, and the new day was not far off.

His interview with Captain Cobra, coupled with the strange bequest made by that mysterious man was still uppermost in his mind.

More than a hundred times since the Mystery's departure, Shott had read the brief lines, which conveyed to him the nine mines already considered his property.

He tried to think out the captain's identity, but the longer he thought the more confused grew his thoughts, and at last he gave up in despair.

"Captain Cobra won't break his parole," said Shott to himself. "He will stay and fight the Tribunal with the odds against him. The verdict has been made up, and sentence passed. To-morrow, Santa Leo will witness the unmasking of the California mystery, for Captain Cobra's coolness and cunning cannot beat the Red Cardinal and his men."

A few minutes later the American went down toward his favorite mine, passing through the rich light of the morning stars.

He did not see the figure by which he was followed, with the eyes of the hawk and the step of the lynx, and when he entered the mine, and moved toward the private office he kept there, the shadow was almost near enough to have touched him.

Sam Shott was immersed in the study of some papers, which he took from a clumsy desk in the underground chamber, when he was aroused by a sound which told him that he was not alone.

"I beg your pardon," said a voice as he turned and looked, and a man with a beard almost as red as Rutherford's leaned toward him with a hand resting on a corner of the desk.

"Is he going to stay and fight 'em?" continued the miner who was known as Sid Sultan.

"I think he is," answered Shott.

"It is foolishness," was the response. "You know that, Captain Sam."

The bonanza boss said nothing for a moment.

"I don't like a man who hides his face. It looks cowardly; but I'm not here to say that Captain Cobra has no right to do it if he wants to. I don't exactly know why he follows people with his iron knife, but I've noticed that he never kills a gentleman."

Sam Shott smiled.

"Now," Sultan came closer and his voice dropped to a whisper of importance. "Now, I've followed you to say this: I think I've made a discovery concerning Captain Cobra."

"You, Sultan?"

"Yes—me."

"Well, what is it?"

"He walks like Colonel Midas used to."

Shott leaned back and for several seconds looked amazedly into Sultan's face.

"Colonel Midas disappeared several years ago in the Shasta country. He was a great man in his day. He seemed to convert into gold everything he touched. A long time after his disappearance they found his body in one of his mines so strangely preserved that it was recognized on sight."

Sultan listened to Shott with some impatience and a sly twinkle of humor in his eyes.

"All that happened," said he. "The story of Colonel Midas is pretty well known all over California. It isn't confined to the Shasta country where it took place. They did find a body in his boss mine. I saw it."

Sultan received from the man who heard him a look of surprise.

"You never mentioned this before," exclaimed Shott.

"I never had occasion to."

"You never even intimated that you once mined in the Shasta region."

"No, perhaps not. I am one of those men who don't parade their history in public. As I've just said. I was there when they fetched Colonel Midas out of his mine."

"As a mummy, Sultan?"

"As a mummy!"

"Go on. You are getting interesting."

"The whole camp was thrown into great ex-

citement by the find," continued Sultan the miner, who had folded his arms and was talking coolly. "They exposed the remains on the porch of the Double Dagger Hotel for twenty-four hours, after which they took 'em away and buried 'em. It all comes back fresh to me. I see that some of the faces I saw then haven't changed much since. Men wear their beards a little longer but not a mite redder. That's what I remark, Captain Sam."

Sultan met the young nabob's look with a mystified glance. He seemed to anticipate what was coming.

"He was there with his fingers in the best pie just as he has 'em here," he went on.

"You mean Rutherford?"

"I mean the Red Cardinal."

"What was he there?"

"In the Shasta country?"

"Yes."

"He was against Colonel Midas."

"An open enemy?"

"Not exactly that, but he was against him all the same. He and his Serpents—"

"What! were the Silver Serpents in existence then?"

"Not as they exist now. They had another name which was not known to the community at large as their title is here to-day. Besides, there were about forty in the gang, but their chief was the same man who calls himself the Red Cardinal in Santa Leo. It's kinder strange, eh?" smiled Sultan.

"Nothing is strange in California," answered Shott. "But let us go back. What sort of looking man was Colonel Midas?"

The miner saw that the bonanza-owner was intensely interested.

"He had a good shape, not greatly unlike yours, captain," was the answer, and Sultan looked the nabob over as he sat on the stool before the desk. "Colonel Midas was dark of skin, which gave rise to a report once circulated that he had Spanish or Mexican blood in his veins. He wore a mustache that was as black as the raven's wing, with long hair which touched his broad shoulders. His eyes seemed to look a fellow through and through, but they could be soft at will, though owing to the excitement of money-making and the plots of his secret enemies they did not soften much. That was Colonel Midas at the time he disappeared, leaving all his wealth behind."

"What became of it?"

"The wolves got it."

"The Red Cardinal and his companions?"

"Yes."

"Did they fight over the spoil?"

"They fought like mad. The little camp graveyard got new dwellers during the next two years, but the Cardinal went off, and when I left, the Midas Mines had given out."

Sam Shott turned to the desk, and diving one hand into its depths produced a leathern pocket-book from which he took a slip of paper which he handed to Sultan.

"Where did you get this?" asked the miner, looking up from the paper and catching the American's eye.

"I clipped it from a paper which accidentally fell into my hands after the finding of Colonel Midas's body."

"The account is fairly correct," said Sultan, when he had finished reading the clipping.

"It mentions the rumor which prevailed then that somewhere—beyond the limits of Shasta Land—Colonel Midas had a wife. What do you know about that, Sultan?"

"I guess it was mere rumor," replied the miner, evasively.

Sam Shott was not satisfied, but he did not say so.

He knew the man before him to be thoroughly devoted to his interests. Sultan had been in his employ ever since he came to Santa Leo, but his reticence regarding his past history had prevented him (Shott) from learning what he had just learned.

"Are you going to be a witness to-morrow?" suddenly queried Shott.

"Gods, no!" ejaculated Sultan. "I don't want the Silver Serpents at my heels. Besides, the Red Cardinal seems to have forgotten me. I never cut any figure in Shasta Land, though I know a good deal about Colonel Midas and the secret enemies he had. Me a witness for Captain Cobra? I've been talking about the colonel, not about the Hooded Mystery of the Hills."

"So you have, Sultan; but you said awhile ago that Captain Cobra has a walk which recalls the once bonanza nabob of Shasta."

"He has; I say that again," exclaimed Sultan. "I saw him awhile ago. I followed him as long as I dared. Something about him fascinated me. But if he stands trial the hood will come off to-morrow."

"He will meet the Tribunal."

"And end in the Square of Santa Leo the drama of Captain Cobra and his iron knife!"

"Don't be too certain of that," answered Shott, with a faint smile.

"He can't fight the whole gang successfully. Who will reinforce the man of mystery? Will you?"

The bonanza nabob did not speak.

"I will not, and you must stand aloof," and

Sultan's big hand dropped softly upon his master's shoulder. "You have already become a marked man."

"How marked?"

"Your command for Basil to keep his hands off Captain Cobra has brought down upon you the hatred and suspicion of the Silver Serpents and their chief. More than this: You have not forgotten the last lines written by Madam Marcia."

Sam Shott started and fell back.

"You are to protect and stand by her child, Dolores," continued Sultan. "No difference what the mother was, the girl is an angel. I'd go through fire and water for her myself, and I'm nothing but a common chump. The trial of Captain Cobra will not end the play. The Red Cardinal has more trumps in his hands than the ones he hopes to throw to-morrow. Don't you understand me, Captain Sam? I repeat that you must keep from interfering in Captain Cobra's behalf. You have gone too far in that direction already. They got away with Colonel Midas despite his wealth and power, and I have but to remind you that the man who led the plot then is here now and far more powerful in Santa Leo than he was in Shasta Land."

Sam Shott flushed indignantly under Sultan's words.

"Don't rate me as a coward, Sultan!" he exclaimed.

"No. To think of Dolores and let Captain Cobra go to the doom he has courted is not cowardice."

"But it stirs my blood!"

"Cool it down, then," said the miner. "If you show a hot head to-morrow everything is lost. Everything! Do you realize what that means, Captain Sam?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE EDGE OF THE CLOUD.

THERE were those in Santa Leo who did not sleep much that eventful night.

The wind fluttered the warning on the Red Cardinal's door and blew round the blade of the iron knife which pierced it like an arrow.

The Cold Deck was not closed at all.

Just before daybreak the tall figure of Rutherford was seen approaching the resort and in a little while he sauntered across the step and caught the eye of a man who had been there more than an hour waiting for some one.

The two went off together, exchanging no words until the Red Cardinal had led the way into his own house, giving a scornful look to the iron blade as he passed the door.

"Monte," he said turning suddenly upon his companion who would have been good-looking but for a livid scar which told that at one time his cheek had been laid bare to the bone.

"Well, captain?" answered the man.

"Is he here yet?"

"He is here."

"Where is he?"

"Jared, who came in just before you beckoned me, reports him asleep."

Rutherford's look seemed to become a stare of wonder.

"I can't believe it," he exclaimed. "It doesn't seem possible that Captain Cobra would go to sleep in Santa Leo on the eve of his trial by our Tribunal. What do you think, Monte?"

"The man is undoubtedly a cool head. But for all that it does not look reasonable that—"

"That he would sleep under these circumstances, eh?" interrupted Rutherford.

Monte bowed.

"However, I've known condemned men to sleep in the shadow of their gallows," mused the Red Cardinal in audible tones. "This Mystery needs quiet nerves for the ordeal. He must look at it in that light; but by Jove! if I were in his boots I would never let sleep get a grip on my eyelids."

The two men laughed together after which the chief of the Silver Serpents threw some paper before Monte and pointed to pen and ink already on the table.

"There must be something formal about the coming trial," said he. "Draw up an indictment of some sort. Make it as lawyer-like as you can. You've had some experience in that line. As the public prosecutor of Merced in the days when the law and Judge Lynch took turns you ought to know just what is needed now."

The man with the scar began to write without much preparation.

For a while the Red Cardinal watched him with manifest interest, but as his task lengthened the chief's look fell away, and during the next five minutes Monte wrote unwatched.

When the pen paused at the bottom of the sheet the ex-prosecutor of Merced county read to Rutherford the formal indictment of Captain Cobra for the killing of Durango Dan, the crime for which he was to be tried in a few hours.

There was a good deal of roughly expressed legal language in the document, and Rutherford expressed himself satisfied with Monte's efforts.

"Captain Cobra will plead guilty," remarked the Red Cardinal.

"If he answers at all he will."

"What do you mean?"

Monte smiled at Rutherford's question.

"He may reject the right of the Tribunal to try him."

"And refuse to enter a plea of any kind?"

"Exactly."

The face of the big sport of Santa Leo grew dark under the frown that settled over it.

"The man of mystery might take that twist on us, Monte," he exclaimed. "It wouldn't be a bad idea, either. But," he suddenly brightened and his eyes got a malicious flash, "but by Jove! that won't save him. We are going to strip the black hood from a dead face! We intend to play the death-trump against Captain Cobra in spite of his cunning and nerve."

Monte did not reply.

"He will be friendless at the trial," continued Rutherford. "Sam Shott whose command held Basil back when we looked for a scene won't dare to interfere at the session of the Tribunal. He is no fool. If he does own nine mines and employ a hundred men he knows better than to pit himself against us."

"Sam Shott will not step between Captain Cobra and the court of Santa Leo."

"I almost wish he would!" cried Rutherford.

"We've got to come together some time. The meeting is inevitable. Santa Leo is too small to hold both of us much longer. One must emigrate peaceably if he will, forcibly if he must. I've dealt with nabobs before this. I know how to handle them. You've seen some of my work, Monte, and you know that I never take a step backward. By the way I saw the old inscription awhile ago."

"The one in Madam Marcia's mine?" queried the man with the scar.

"Yes."

"Is it as plain as ever?"

"I see no difference."

"Who placed it there, think you, captain?"

"The woman perhaps."

"Doubtless. She wasn't far wrong. The mills of God do grind small—"

"And they grind the entire grist, eh, Monte?"

"I think so."

"We will call Captain Cobra the grist for them to-morrow, or to-day, for I see the morning is here," and the Red Cardinal looking at the window saw the first signs of daylight there.

"What do you think of the man in our power?" suddenly resumed Rutherford.

"If you mean what do I think of his identity, I must call him as great a mystery as ever."

"Then you have no idea what sort of face he wears behind his hood?"

"I have none."

"Monte, did it ever occur to you that Captain Cobra might be an old enemy whose killings with the iron are blows for vengeance and not the freaks of a madman's brain?"

"No."

"Maybe you have never thought much about it."

"I've lain awake thinking about Captain Cobra the hooded."

The Cardinal passed his fingers through his flowing red beard, and his lips parted in a smile.

"I think the whole mystery is on the eve of a solution," said he.

"By Jove! I hope so."

"Ah! you want to escape the iron knife."

"Who does not?" answered Monte, shrugging his broad shoulders. "Once when I found a man dead in his cabin with the iron dagger pinning him to the floor, I felt a chill at my heart."

"Who was that man?"

"He called himself Dick Mosco."

"But that was not the name he had when we knew him."

"No. In the Shasta camp he was Yuba Yank."

"You are right, Monte. The man you found dead three months later on his little claim pinned in the same manner to the ground, was at one time your chum in the old camp."

"Yes."

"Now, what do you think of Captain Cobra?"

With the piercing eyes of the Red Cardinal fixed upon him, Monte fell back and suddenly clapped his hand to his head.

"My God!" cried he.

"You will start me on a new trail if you keep on. We had enemies in Shasta Land, but I can't name one who would be on a death-hunt with the persistence which has characterized Captain Cobra's trail. The man we fought went away as Colonel Midas and came back a mummy from the heart of one of his own mines."

Rutherford of the red beard looked at Monte, but made no reply.

"We've got to kill him to see who he is!" the man with the scar proceeded, striking the table with his fist.

"By no other means can the mystery be solved," rejoined the Red Cardinal.

"Then you think that the removal of the hood will solve the puzzle?"

"I do."

"The sooner the better!" exclaimed Monte. "The indictment I have drawn up will hold water in a court like the one we have here. Of course it is not gilt-edged, for I'm no Philadelphia lawyer, but by Jupiter! it is strong

enough to rid the Santa Barbara Hills of the hooded mystery who has infested them. The proof intended to convict is a matter of no especial concern."

"No," said the Red Cardinal. "Durango Dan was found dead shortly after a certain revolver had been fired. Captain Cobra was caught—taken unawares a few yards from the spot where the body was discovered. The jury will do the rest."

"Of course."

Ten minutes after this conversation, the lawyer of Santa Leo saw a cabin door open, and the next moment he was gazing at the well-molded figure of Captain Cobra, as he stood in the doorway with his eyes drinking in with satisfaction, as it were, the fresh light of the new day.

"I wonder what he's thinking about?" thought Monte, while he studied the figure, noticing more especially the famous hood which concealed its wearer's face with the same persistency as ever, the folds falling gracefully over the shoulders, concealing the entire head.

Captain Cobra did not seem to perceive that he was being studied with breathless interest by the man who had just quitted the Red Cardinal's house.

He stood at his ease in the doorway, looking half-carelessly toward the Square in plain view, with his shapely hands at his sides, and half-clinched, as if their owner's thoughts were resolute ones.

All at once Captain Cobra left the cabin.

He walked toward the Square, crossed it quickly, and entered the Cold Deck. Perhaps he had seen the well-known figure of Thor Rutherford enter the place. At any rate, he found the captain of the Serpents at the bar, and before the Red Cardinal could turn to see whose step had fallen upon his ear, his hand dropped upon his shoulder, and he had said in the coolest voice imaginable:

"We don't get to drink together often, Captain Rutherford. Won't you have one with me this morning?"

The cool audacity of the man of mystery fell like a thunderbolt upon the Red Cardinal. His face got redder than his ample beard, and he fell backward—he could not help it—from the penetrating eyes of Captain Cobra.

"What! do you refuse to touch glasses with the prisoner of your Tribunal?" continued the human puzzle, with a light laugh. "It may be our last drink together."

"It shall be!" exclaimed Rutherford, springing forward, and while he waited for the beverage to be set before him, he thought he saw a laugh in the bright eyes behind the hood.

CHAPTER XIX.

MYSTIFIED DOLORES.

"COOL as a cucumber, and playing it through to the end," ejaculated Rutherford, as Captain Cobra, with a wave of the hand, turned his back upon the astonished occupants of the ranch and walked out with a steady and defiant step.

Nobody replied for a moment.

"He didn't show the smallest bit of his face," said one of the men at last.

"Not he," smiled the Red Cardinal. "We'll see it after the trial, though, or I'm not Rutherford, of Santa Leo."

As to Captain Cobra, he stopped in the Square and seemed to survey his surroundings.

If he had looked intently in a certain direction he might have seen the iron knife which he had left at the Red Cardinal's door, for both were visible from where he stood.

"I know them all. They are here—the twelve of the old gang—and under the thumb of the same monarch," said he. "The red beard is a trifle longer, and the voice has not changed. He was taken aback by my sudden appearance; but in order to show off—to flash in the pan, as it were—he blurted out that it should be our last drink together. Captain Cobra takes you at your word, Rutherford. Our last drink together? Yes!"

A sound very much like a laugh of triumph came through the hood and the dozen men who had been watching the man of mystery from the open door of the Cold Deck saw him walk away and disappear beyond the boundary of the camp Plaza.

As the sun came up broadening the day the men of Santa Leo came forth ready and eager to witness the first session the Tribunal had held in a long while.

There was a good deal of speculation as to the proceedings, but none as to the outcome.

The presence in camp of Captain Cobra was a surprise. It was generally supposed that he would quietly leave during the night, breaking the parole he had given, and go back to the trails and to the unfinished work of the iron blade.

The odds were all against him.

No one believed that Sam Shott who had arrested the collision threatened by Basil the hot-head would again interfere, for despite his position and power as a bonanza boss, Rutherford and the Silver Serpents were more powerful still.

But instead of backing out of the tigers' den Captain Cobra was still in it.

His nerve was a source of wonder.

There was another person besides the men who hailed the Mystery's resolution with mingled feelings of astonishment and fear.

It was early morning when Dolores, Madam Marcia's daughter, caught sight of the splendid figure of Captain Cobra as he crossed the Square after his encounter with the Red Cardinal and came down the street toward her own home.

Standing at the little window and partly hidden by a curtain the girl watched the strange man intently.

He appeared to fascinate her.

What sort of face did he carry beneath his hood? Was his the countenance of a demon, or was it so disfigured that he would not let the sunlight fall upon it?

Dolores had heard much of Captain Cobra, the Man with the Iron Knife. She had followed him from stroke to stroke by the men who had been found dead here and there, with the dreaded dagger in their hearts and the warnings they had not obeyed pinned to their coats.

Was he a vengeance-hunter, or madman?

Once, it was long before the opening of our story, she had asked her mother about him, but Madam Marcia had turned her head away, saying nothing.

The Angel of Santa Leo had forgotten this, and now while she watched Captain Cobra, the scene came back, and she wondered in spite of herself if her mother knew anything about the man.

Captain Cobra threw a quick glance at the cabin as he came forward, and the eyes seemed to single Dolores out at her station among the folds of the curtain.

The girl could not keep back the little cry that started to her lips.

The eyes in the street seemed to dwell on the window for several moments in a longing yet an inquisitive look.

"He is coming to me!" exclaimed Dolores, drawing back, for all at once Captain Cobra turned toward the house, and almost before she could quit the window, a quick rap announced his arrival.

With her heart in her throat, Madam Marcia's daughter sprang to the door, and the next moment she held it open and was looking into the eyes behind the black mask.

They were not excited now; on the contrary, they had a softened look, which mystified the girl.

Captain Cobra touched the broad brim of his hat and came in before an invitation could part Dolores's lips.

"I don't come often," said he in a rich voice, while he looked into the colorless and anxious face before him. "In fact, I'm not very welcome in Santa Leo."

"You speak truly," replied Dolores.

"You have heard, then?"

"They have told me. You are to appear before the Tribunal."

Captain Cobra bowed, and for the first time in the girl's presence the dark eyes seemed to emit a defiant light.

"At ten o'clock," said he. "They have set the time, and I have acquiesced. It is for murder, I believe."

"Murder!" echoed Dolores, with a slight start, for she thought of the death of Madam Marcia and of the vow it had called forth.

"A serious crime, eh?" replied Captain Cobra.

"A very serious one."

"What do you know?"

The very suddenness of the question both surprised Dolores and helped to put her on her guard.

Was she expected to become a witness for the victim in the net—to incur the hatred of Rutherford and his men for a man whose deeds had made her blood run cold?

"Don't let me drag you into the controversy," Captain Cobra hastened to say, seeing the effect of his words upon the girl. "I don't intend to make you a part of this drama for power. You shall not be called to the witness stand. I merely asked about your knowledge of Durango Dan's affairs."

A feeling of relief came to the young girl's heart.

"He had enemies hadn't he?" continued Captain Cobra.

"He was not a Silver Serpent."

The hood lowered.

"That is answer enough," said the hidden lips. "I am accused of murdering this man and with the revolver at that, *when* this is my weapon."

At the same time the hands of Captain Cobra produced a dagger at sight of which Dolores recoiled with a sharp cry.

She saw in his palm the dreaded knife so terribly connected with his name. She noticed the iron handle and the tapering blade, the latter polished until its surface had the look of tempered steel.

Captain Cobra seemed to view her trepidation with keen delight.

"Do you think I would go back on my record?" he asked glancing from Dolores's face to the knife.

"I do not, Captain Cobra. I have never

heard of you using aught but the knife I see in your hand. But can you prove that you did not send the soul of Durango Dan to its Maker?"

Dolores finished her question hastily, feeling that she had gone too far.

"Wait and see," said the man in the hood. "I am to have no show. The court before which I am to appear rejoices in the permanent fixture of a packed jury. I've seen such courts before. Organized to convict, and a stranger to mercy."

He seemed to laugh, at any rate the speech had ended in a sneer.

Dolores wondered if he had invaded her house to tell her this.

Certainly he had come on an errand more important.

A moment later the hooded figure came closer still.

"My child," said Captain Cobra, "I want a fair answer, no evasion, no refusal. Between you and I there is a stream of which you may know nothing. The lips of the dead speak not. Secrets never come back from the grave."

An indescribable thrill pervaded the girl's frame. She saw the piercing eyes of the man of mystery fastened upon her with all the weird powers of the fascinating serpent.

"Speak!" she cried. "In God's name, Captain Cobra, what do you want me to say?"

The hood came on until it seemed to touch her face. At the same time a hand darting forward seized her wrist, but there was no need of that. She was powerless to move, so completely was she at the mercy of the unknown.

"What do you know about your mother's ring?"

Dolores did not start at the question. Nothing would have moved her.

"My mother's ring?" she repeated. "She had two, Captain Cobra."

"Ah!" ejaculated the unseen lips. "I mean the one whose setting was a serpent's head. You are not going to deceive me, Dolores. She left that ring behind."

"I have it," said the girl.

"I want to see it."

At the same time the hand at her wrist, unclasping, left her free.

"Go and get it, child," he continued, softly.

Dolores gave him another look and turned away.

She passed into the little room adjoining the one of the interview and was gone a minute.

When she came back her hand held a golden ring whose set was a serpent's head with a pair of diamond eyes.

Dropping the bauble into the palm of Captain Cobra, she stepped back and looked at him.

For a second he eyed the ring without taking it up or moving his hand.

"It is not new to him," thought the girl. "He knew my mother had it. But why does he seek it on the eve of the opening of the death court of Santa Leo?"

Suddenly Captain Cobra took the ring in both hands. He held it between fingers and thumbs in the manner of a pair of vises, and the next second he gave a twist, which to the girl's surprise loosened the serpent's head and then removed it altogether!

The coolness of the mysterious man, coupled with his knowledge of the ring, held Dolores spellbound.

She saw him shake something from the little hollow revealed by the removal of the setting, and then, with the same nonchalance, he made the ring whole and handed it back.

"A thousand thanks, child," said he. "You have rendered Captain Cobra a service of a lifetime. In other words, you have armed him against the Red Cardinal and his Tribunal," and with a bow which was gratitude itself, the man of mystery vanished, and Dolores was left bewildered and alone.

CHAPTER XX.

A MAN OF SAND.

THE hour of ten had come.

Already the shanty-bordered Plaza of Santa Leo held an anxious, dark-faced crowd.

A rough table of ample dimensions had been carried from the Cold Deck and now occupied a place in the exact center of the Square.

The mountain Tribunal was an institution which was not envied with red tape.

The man who had organized it was a man who believed in going straight to the mark without any preliminaries and the court was expected to open in a plain matter-of-fact manner.

Monte, the public prosecutor, had given his black mustache an additional twist for the occasion and had even brushed the mine dust from his boots.

The appointed hour found him seated on a stool at one end of the table dividing his glances between the paper he held in his hands and a certain street that ran westward from the Square.

By and by Rutherford crossed the space between Monte and the edge of the open place and bent over the prosecutor's shoulder, which his red beard nearly covered.

"He intends to fight us," whispered the Red Cardinal.

"So much the better," returned Monte. "A battle insures conviction."

"He seems to have armed himself with some kind of weapon on which he relies."

"His iron knife?"

"No, not that."

"What, then?"

"There's just where I'm puzzled," and Rutherford met Monte's upward glance with a faint smile. "He has had an interview with Dolores."

"Impossible!"

"It is true. Captain Cobra was seen to quit the girl's house. More than this, Dolores admits an interview with him, but refused to disclose what took place."

The prosecutor of the Tribunal was silent for a moment.

"Do you think he got his new weapon there?" he asked at length.

"I—don't—know," answered the Red Cardinal, slowly.

"How could the girl arm Captain Cobra?"

"Ah, there is the mystery!" exclaimed Rutherford.

"Armed or not, this will not fail," and Monte touched the indictment lying before him, which we have seen him draw up in the Red Cardinal's house.

Rutherford stepped back, and looked down the street which had attracted the anxious Monte.

At that moment the door of a shanty in full view opened suddenly, and the assembled populace, with several exceptions, saw the hooded figure of Captain Cobra.

The man of mystery came forward with unfeigned eagerness in his strides.

The sunlight fell upon the dark mask, and showed him off to those who regarded him with awe and speculation.

If he was armed he did not show it, though not a man who saw him doubted that he carried in his bosom the exact duplicate of the iron blade sticking in Rutherford's door.

The observed of all observers, Captain Cobra came on, and crossed the fringe of the Square, with his glance fixed half-inquisitively on Monte at his table, with a pair of wondering eyes staring at him in return.

The following moment the form of the prisoner of the Tribunal stood erect in the open court.

He had appeared for trial!

The very manner of his coming, and the cool, eagle-like look in his eyes, seemed to embarrass the men who surrounded him.

"What's the use?" mentally exclaimed Rutherford. "Whatever may have been said about him, Captain Cobra is human like the rest of us."

And then, catching Monte's eye, he gave a sign which the prosecutor understood.

Catching up his paper, Monte left his seat and turned toward Captain Cobra, who was looking straight into his face.

"The prisoner may not be aware that the jury of the Tribunal of Santa Leo is a permanent fixture—having been established five years ago. Its members hold life appointments which may be revoked for misbehavior. The twelve men stand on my left, and as the prosecutor of this court, I present them to the prisoner at the bar."

Monte waved his hand toward the dark-faced dozen who occupied a prominent position on his left, and for a moment Captain Cobra looked them over collectively, his eyes seeming to twinkle the while.

The jury stood erect in their heavy boots, and returned the prisoner's look with some interest.

It was look for look for a few seconds.

Monte opened the indictment, and with a glance at Captain Cobra began to read.

Not a sound interrupted his effort. His voice, clear and strong, maintained itself to the close, and with the last sentence on his tongue, he transfixed the man of mystery with his gaze.

"The prisoner will now answer to the charges set forth in the indictment," said Monte.

"Guilty or not guilty?"

There was not an eye on the Square that did not see Captain Cobra at this exciting moment.

"Not guilty!" rung out with such clearness that the last words seemed to part lips not concealed by anything. "In the first place Captain Cobra repudiates the pretended authority of the Tribunal of Santa Leo. It has no right to try him for any crime. A packed jury in the hands of an infamous judge. That man yonder, who holds under his thumb his betters in everything, is bound to fasten on me a crime whose secret he carries in his own bosom. Captain Cobra refuses to proceed further with the farce inaugurated by Thor Rutherford, the Red Cardinal-vulture and serpent under one skin!"

Those who expected to see Rutherford break forth in a mad response to these words, which stung him like the tongue of a serpent, saw him smile with derision.

Captain Cobra was in the trap, and he (Rutherford) could afford to keep cool.

"The prisoner has answered," said Monte, catching his cue from the Red Cardinal. "He

enters a plea of not guilty. With his other words this court has nothing to do."

The man in the hood took another step toward the table.

He held out his hand for the indictment, which at first Monte refused, but in the end he extended it, and Captain Cobra appeared to go through it with critical eye.

"I will not answer to this paper," cried he. "Gentlemen of the jury, as you have been instructed by your chief, you may fetch in the usual verdict, without subjecting yourselves to any strain of conscience."

The bronzed twelve stared blankly at the man who stood on the other side of the table with a leveled finger designating them all, with Monte, red in the face and nearly out of breath, shaking his head at them a few feet away.

"The trial will proceed!" cried the prosecutor. "The dignity of this Tribunal is not to be derided by the prisoner at the bar. I will call the first witness—"

"You will do nothing of the kind!" was the sharp interruption, and Captain Cobra wheeled upon Monte with the ringing words on his lips.

"Your master yonder is dumb. He stands like a Sphinx in the court he has created. Once before he stood thus and opened not his mouth, but it was not here. Does he know that the forty-eight hours allotted by the warning now on his door have ended? Is he the coward he used to be, or has some courage been blown into his heart by the mountain winds of Santa Barbara?"

A dead silence followed Captain Cobra's speech.

Still outwardly cool the Red Cardinal towered above all his companions. His arms were folded on his broad chest and his fiery red beard was pinioned down beneath them.

"Don't let him bluster you out of your head, Rutherford," he was saying to himself, while he watched Captain Cobra. "The fly is trying to find a weak place in the web. Keep your head and the game is yours."

All at once the man in the hood came toward the Red Cardinal.

The whole crowd held its breath.

"I did not leave my only blade in your door," he said, addressing Rutherford. "Here I have two more. A revolver is something I do not carry, therefore the man who stands ready to swear that Captain Cobra killed Durango Dan will record a damning lie upon the books of Heaven."

In the palm which had been suddenly thrust toward the Red Cardinal lay two iron knives, exactly alike in shape of handle, length and contour of blade.

They were twins.

"Take your choice!" continued Captain Cobra, meeting Rutherford's look with his accustomed coolness. "We will settle the whole matter where we stand. The knives are exactly alike. They came from the same forge. If you win, the hood which has hidden my face for years shall be lifted in the presence of the Tribunal; if you lose, Captain Cobra will go back to his trail, to follow it to the end if Heaven so wills. What says Rutherford of Santa Leo?"

"I won't fight you!" exclaimed the chief of the Silver Serpents. "I can't take from the Tribunal its right to try the man charged with the murder of Durango Dan."

A laugh came through the folds of the hood.

"Then let the Cardinal of Santa Leo answer to a court not packed for the darkest crimes under heaven," said Captain Cobra. "He refuses to choose a knife from the hand of Iron Blade. I shall not press it. Gentlemen of Santa Leo, behold the coward of California! Six feet seven in his boots, with the physique of a giant and the beard of a viking, he carries in his breast the heart of a hare! I refuse to be tried by a court owned by a poltroon. I reject the indictment read in your hearing, and I leave it pinned to the table, the daggered lie of this camp!"

A quick step carried Captain Cobra to the table, and the next moment, in the presence of all, one of the iron knives came down with tremendous force, and piercing Monte's paper through the center, left it fastened to the wood like an impaled fly!

Falling back, the man of mystery threw a swift look at Rutherford, who was white at the roots of his beard.

"The blood of Durango Dan is where that man's hands can touch without much effort," said he. "Captain Cobra will answer fairly and fight in the same manner in any legalized court, but here he repudiates the indictment drawn under the eye of the murderer himself, for the hands hidden by the red beard took the miner's life. Gentlemen of the jury, your Cardinal is the proper person to be tried by you—not Captain Cobra!"

Thor Rutherford came forward like a wild beast. He had been roused at last.

"Ah! I have pierced you!" exclaimed Captain Cobra. "Take the dagger from the indictment if you accept the challenge. By heavens, Count Cactus, I have longed for this hour!"

The new name stopped the Red Cardinal.

It seemed to have pierced him through like an arrow.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LAWYER BLOODHOUND.

THE effect of this unlooked-for utterance on the part of the tough crowd, was almost startling.

Captain Cobra had cast a bomb at the Red Cardinal's feet.

The name Count Cactus had halted him in an instant.

"The knife is yonder," repeated the man of mystery, pointing at the dagger with which he had just fixed Monte's indictment to the table. "It awaits your pleasure, count. There was a time when it would have been in your hand ere this. What! don't you want to meet Captain Cobra on your own ground? Then let it be elsewhere."

Once more the hooded chief turned from the bearded Ajax of Santa Leo, and in the face of the whole crowd walked coolly away.

He was watched by eyes that fairly blazed with mad eagerness, and Rutherford had but to lift his hand to precipitate a score of stalwart loughs upon him.

But the signal was not given; the Silver Serpents saw the opportunity pass with scowls and mutterings.

Captain Cobra walked back to the cabin.

At the door he turned half-way round and looked toward the Plaza, but he was too far away to let the Californians read his thoughts by the eyes in the hood.

"Monte?" said the Red Cardinal, speaking for the first time since Captain Cobra's departure. "Monte, dismiss the Tribunal."

The public prosecutor turned to obey, but the court was dismissing itself, and a moment later Rutherford, sullen and sour of countenance, was walking off alone.

"In God's name who is he?" he asked himself in half-audible tones. "The mystery grows, and the secret of the iron blade is as far off as ever. A look behind the hood would solve it, and I hoped to have had that pleasure to-day, but he held the best hand. Single-handed, Captain Cobra has won a point against Santa Leo. He threw into my teeth a name which would have stopped me anywhere. If my finger had been pressing a trigger, that name would have held it in check. What does he know? Did Dolores arm him with the weapon he used at the right time? Impossible, I say, and yet—By the stars of Heaven, he came away from her house better prepared to meet us than when he went thither."

Twenty minutes later Monte entered Rutherford's house, and surprised him with the information that Captain Cobra had left Santa Leo.

"Did he depart with any demonstration?" the chief of the Serpents eagerly inquired.

"No. He rode away as coolly as he came."

"The boys were willing to let him go thus, eh?"

"It seems so."

"Which way did he go?"

"Westward."

"Up the mountain then?"

"Up the mountain."

The Red Cardinal seemed to reflect for a moment.

"Where was Basil and his rifle?" he suddenly asked smiling faintly.

"I don't know. The truth is, Basil isn't going to take chances again. He is now glad that Sam Shott kept him from jumping at Captain Cobra last night. He recalled the fact that some of the victims of the iron blade had broken necks. Captain Cobra must have a grip of iron coupled with an agility which would make even a physical superior a child in his hands."

The Red Cardinal did not like the last sentence which seemed to reflect on himself, but he hastened to answer Monte in a strain which showed that he was not yet done with Captain Cobra.

"I shall go straight to one thing, Monte," said he, "and that is the identity of that masked assassin. You did not lose a word of his talk on the Square?"

"Not a word."

"You heard, then, the epithet he held back till the last moment and then launched at me like throwing a stone from a catapult."

"Of course I heard it."

"It had its effect, eh, Monte?"

"It did."

"By Jove! I as soon expected the skies above us to fall in a heap."

"I thought so, Captain Thor."

"Where do you suppose he got the bolt?"

Monte of Santa Leo shook his head.

"Can't you come at it in any way?" queried the Red Cardinal.

"The solving of his identity seems to be the best key to the secret," rejoined Monte.

"True. But I want to get at it now. He picked up a weapon at Dolores's house. Was it the one he used in the game?"

"How could it be? The girl is without a history beyond the well-known fact that she is Madam Marcia's child. How could she arm Captain Cobra?"

"Ay, there is where I stick," grinned Rutherford. "We'll get at the mystery by and by. I want Captain Cobra followed."

"Followed?" echoed Monte, falling back, as

he thought of the nerve it would take to track the man of mystery through the mountains to his secret haunts.

"Followed! I used the proper word," repeated Rutherford. "The sooner we gather up our lost trumps or get new ones, the better. Monte, I have chosen you for this undertaking."

If his death sentence had been pronounced the lawyer of Santa Leo would not have lost more color.

"You know the trails of the hills as well as you know law," he continued. "You can follow a horse better than you can frame an indictment which is no reflection upon your legal head. I need a man of cunning, agility and nerve. You contain all these qualities. I've seen you tried before to-day. I know what mettle you're made of. I have tasted your grit and perseverance in the days when Count Cactus ruled with an iron hand and when all his subjects were bonanza princes. Count Cactus! Ha, ha, Monte. How does the old name sound after such a lapse of time?"

Monte was in no humor for joking. He did not respond to the Red Cardinal's laugh in like measure, but again frowned his disapproval of the selection Rutherford had made for the dangerous mission.

"We'll try to hold the fort till you come back," continued the bearded desperado. "Now that Captain Cobra has left us and Don Caddo is missing, we won't have much to bother us. Sam Shott won't cross swords with the Serpents. He knows enough to make money and let well enough alone."

"The man did Captain Cobra a favor."

"Yes. It was on the impulse of the moment. We were crowding the Mystery of the hills and Shott is American enough to take sides with the under dog. Cooler reflection has followed since. Oh, we can handle the bonanza nabob."

"If the Carquinez Cat should come back—"

"Come back from where?" broke in Rutherford, and then as Monte did not answer he went on:

"The claws of that cat will never flash from beneath the velvet again. As I told Major Midget, they have been sharpened for the last time. I speak with authority, Monte. The way is clear to the Angel of California, and a stroke of policy dealt as one was dealt in other days will remove every obstacle between us and the mines which pour the golden dust into the American's coffers. Leave all this to me. I have never failed. Go to the trail in the mountains. Follow Captain Cobra to his retreat. Bring all your nerve and cunning into play. Make no mistake, for while that man rides in mask with the iron knife in his belt the brotherhood of the Silver Serpents is not safe."

Monte withdrew leaving the Red Cardinal alone.

He passed from the house glancing with a shudder at the iron blade whose hilt was buried in the door and then walked rapidly away.

He knew that the secret of his mission was the property of Rutherford and himself.

He did not single out any person with whom to share the secret.

Once in his shanty, he broke out in a volley of curses. For several minutes he heaped them in emphatic profusion on the Red Cardinal's head, and then recollecting that time was passing he proceeded to prepare for the mission.

"Ordered to track death through the mountains!" he growled. "I'd as soon expect to pass through the flames of Tartarus and not get singed as to follow Captain Cobra and escape the iron blade. Must I do this? Yes! I am the sworn slave of a man who is no better—nay, worse than I am. I was sold with the rest years and years ago, body and soul to Captain Thor who to-day has had thrown into his teeth a name which once was hated by the very men he enriched. Would to heaven I could break from this infamous league, but I am a part of it until the end comes—until with my boots on and my eyes set I wear in my heart the deadly dagger of the Hidden Face. I'm going to the trail, Captain Thor, and as self-preservation means life to us all I intend to finish the career of Captain Cobra. I will lift the hood and look at the face of this human puzzle who for years has killed the old pards of Shasta Land and the Southwest border."

Monte, who could trail better than he could practice law in the camp courts, led a horse from Santa Leo and at high noon found himself among the elevated passes of the Santa Barbara Hills.

His expressed resolution to follow Captain Cobra to the death showed itself in the set countenance he turned to the door.

Keen, cunning and quick in his movements, Monte was the right man on the Mystery's track, and the Red Cardinal knew this when he selected him from among the Silver Serpents for the mission.

Some time after his departure from Santa Leo the lawyer tracker appeared on a certain trail from which could be seen the shanty roofs of the mining-camp.

He shaded his eyes and looked at them a long time, then suddenly whirled his horse and rode away, wondering what was to transpire ere he saw them again—if ever.

CHAPTER XXII.

MAJOR MIDGET COMES BACK.

"I'll take the paper if you please, miss."

These words fell upon the ears of Dolores a short time after Captain Cobra's departure as the little figure of Major Midget started from the door beside which he had halted several seconds before.

"I have it for you," answered the Angel of Santa Leo, quitting the room a moment, and then the document which the little man had intrusted to her some hours before was restored to its owner.

"I didn't know how the venture was going to pan out," resumed Major Midget, a queer smile appearing at the corners of his mouth. "I didn't get to follow the river to its ending."

"The river?" exclaimed Dolores, starting.

"Yes, the Styx, don't you know?"

"You did not tell me whither you were going."

"Ah! didn't I?" laughed the major. "Well, I didn't think it worth while at the time. It's a strange stream, Dolores. I guess it never gives up its dead."

"I did not know it had any."

"What! that underground flood have no secret?" exclaimed the little man. "It's holding one now, and I've failed to get at it."

"Is it a dark secret, Major Midget?"

"A very dark one."

Dolores did not push her inquiries further. Something seemed to halt her as if she feared to go on for fear of the revelation of a secret which she should not know.

"I'm not satisfied yet," continued Major Midget. "I'm going back to the trail, but I'll take my last will and testament for the present."

He placed in his pocket as he spoke the document Dolores had surrendered and looked at her intently a few moments.

"Captain Cobra wasn't sentenced, eh?" he suddenly remarked.

"He was not."

"He held the best hand, didn't he?"

"At any rate, he walked away and left the Red Cardinal and his men empty-handed."

"Captain Cobra is too much for the Serpents. They don't know him. It is a wonder he did not leave one of his iron blades behind."

"He did. He drove it through Monte's indictment and left it sticking in the table."

"The next time it will transfix a heart, eh, girl?"

"I'm afraid so," answered Dolores with a shudder.

"I am told that Captain Cobra was in this house."

Dolores started slightly.

"He was here," said she.

"Don't tell me anything that may border on a secret," Major Midget hastened to say.

"Of course he did not give you a glimpse of his face."

"He did not."

"Nor give you a clew to his identity?"

"No."

"I'll get too inquisitive if I stay here," smiled the little man. "Hang it all I must have been born with a question in my mouth. Do you know what Captain Cobra called the Red Cardinal?"

"I have not heard."

"He dubbed him Count Cactus just when the two were about to come together and it stopped Rutherford in an instant."

"Count Cactus?" mused Dolores in undertones while Major Midget regarded her closely. "The title is a strange one to me. What does it mean, major?"

There was a singular look in the depths of the little man's eyes.

"It must refer to the past," continued the girl. "Men like Rutherford of Santa Leo have two names sometimes. He may have been 'Count Cactus' at some period of his career."

"I guess Captain Cobra didn't make a mistake," was the major's answer. "I would liked to have seen the thunderclap startle the Cardinal. The boys say he turned all sorts of colors. Count Cactus! Well, I should say so!" And the laugh that followed the last words ended suddenly and the little band of the dwarf sport was giving Dolores a good-by salute.

Major Midget whom we saw last on the banks of the underground lake had come back without having solved to his satisfaction the mystery connected with Don Caddo's disappearance.

The Carquinez Cat was still missing, and a long search beside the Styx, which, flowing through Madam Marcia's mine, lost itself in unknown depths and, so tradition said, at last poured its dark waters into the Pacific.

Major Midget was not long quitting Santa Leo after his interview with Dolores.

He betook himself to the mountains among which, some time later, he thrust his hand into the letter-box of the wild post-office and clutched a bit of paper which he eagerly drew forth into the light.

He read as follows:

"I waited until the last moment for you and Don Caddo, then I went to the Tribunal and created it out of a victim. If you solve the mystery that surrounds the Carquinez Cat, well and good, but don't

risk your life any longer on that trail. The weapon which I drew at the last moment on the Cardinal fairly stunned him. I am now on the last part of the trail. Before long the sun shall shine on the face of
CAPTAIN COBRA."

Major Midget read the note twice before he looked up.

"That's the first time he ever mentioned re-vealment," said he, speaking aloud, and then he went down into Santa Leo, and with his old love for play uppermost, took his seat at one of the Cold Deck's tables as if nothing startling had happened within the last twenty-four hours.

Suddenly Major Midget, looking up saw fixed upon him from the bar the piercing eyes of Rutherford.

He recalled his parting with the man in the heart of Madam Marcia's mine, where he had extinguished his torch with a ball from his revolver, and afterward left him in Stygian darkness.

The eyes of the two men met.

Major Midget seemed to see the mad challenge that burned in the Red Cardinal's orbs, and calmly laying down his hand he got up and went toward him, watched every foot of the way.

There was not a drop of coward blood in the little man's veins.

There was a saying in camp that he would fight a grizzly, even though he knew he could not whip him.

The contrast between the two men was striking, as Major Midget drawing alongside the counter called for a drink without taking notice of Captain Thor.

The giant looked down through his dark eyebrows and covered the little man with a look of hatred.

Major Midget, scarcely a head higher than the counter, poured out his liquor and drank it off with cutting zest.

His cool manner was irritating to the man who looked on.

All at once the big hand of the Cardinal darted forward and dropped like a hawk on Major Midget's shoulder.

The little man colored, and with a quick jerk freed himself from the grip, at the same time giving Rutherford a penetrating look.

"What is it, sir?" he demanded.

"You've been playing spy—playing it for months right here in our midst."

A derisive smile was the response.

"For a copper I'd twist your neck and throw you out of doors," the red rough went on.

"For a thousand dollars you won't do anything of the kind!" retorted Major Midget, drawing back and straightening clear of the bar almost in the center of the room.

Rutherford looked contemptuously at his little enemy and seemed to debate with himself whether it would be best to show the major and all present that the threat he had made was a matter of easy accomplishment.

"The meanest reptile that crawls in the dust is better than the paid spy," cried the Cardinal.

"I am not a paid spy. No man lives who can say with truth that Major Midget is a hired tracker."

"Then, why don't you desert the man you serve?"

"Who is that man?"

The Cardinal glanced at the occupants of the room.

"Gentlemen," said he, "the reptile before me is the possessor of a history in keeping with the position he occupies to-day. A good many years ago— Shall I tell the story, major?"

The lips of the little man parted to say "Go on," and then met again resolutely and pale.

"A good many years ago, as I was saying, a horse came into a certain camp in the San Juan Mountains, dragging at the end of a lasso a dust-covered and bruised object which, when released and washed, turned out to be a human being. Everything indicated that he had been sent to his death for some crime, and it was by the greatest of modern miracles that he came into camp with a spark of life left."

"The man did not die. Three months afterward it was discovered that he was a ranch-burner—that he had fired one of the most beautiful haciendas in the Southwest, and that a band of Regulators had tied him to the lasso and started the horse on the wild which terminated in the camp I have mentioned. There would have been another lasso trip if the ranch-burner had not fled before the men of the camp could get ready for it. He never came back, but now, gentlemen, I have the pleasure of presenting him to you in the person of Colonel Midget."

The Cardinal on whose face was a most sardonic smile, waved his hand toward the little man who had watched him with burning interest from the beginning of the narrative.

"The truth strikes the devil dumb," continued Rutherford. "Look at him! An incendiary then, a spy now. Not only that, but the secret correspondent and watch-dog for the hooded assassin who has just departed."

Then it was that the little figure of Major Midget stirred.

"I am the man who came into Freelance City at the end of a lasso!" said he, taking in the crowd with a glance. "And since Captain Rutherford has gone to the pains of introducing

me to you as that person, let me be equally clever. You don't know the Red Cardinal, gentlemen, or at least all of you do not. Some years ago the pest of the Southwest border was a conscienceless robber named Count Cactus. He plundered ranches, robbed and killed without mercy. He made all his followers rich. I went into Freelance City at the tail of one of the count's horses. It was a way he had of finishing his victims. Now, I stand before him, for the chief of the Silver Serpents—the Red Cardinal of Shasta Leo—is that merciless devil for whose head a dozen towns in the Southwest country offer its weight in dust!"

Rutherford broke into a coarse laugh with the finger of Major Midget leveled at him with the accuracy of a six-shooter.

"Another man will read his history with several new chapters added," continued the little sport. "I don't quarrel with him for that reason. If the career of Count Cactus makes a hero of the Cardinal, Satan will have to keep an eye on his laurels."

Major Midget went to the door as he finished.

"I'll keep my threat just to show you who I am!" cried Rutherford, springing forward. "A twisted neck and a toss into the Square will emphasize my answer."

The little man turned. His hand moved toward his hip, something gleamed for an instant in the light, and the man who fell back as the room rung with a loud report, was the bearded bully of Santa Leo!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DAUGHTER'S TRAIL.

MAJOR MIDGET looked at the quivering form lying at full length on the floor at the foot of the counter, and then with the smoking weapon in his hand walked out, without betraying any traces of excitement.

The shot had paralyzed the crowd to such an extent that he was not molested, and when he reached his own cabin, his wonder was that he had not received a bullet in the back.

Once beyond the door, he took a square block from one of the logs, and placed in the opening a folded paper which he had taken from his bosom.

"Shall it be 'stay and fight,' or 'run and wait?'" he asked himself. "I did not shoot to kill, but there's no telling what a bullet will do after you have touched the trigger. This neck is the only one I have, and I don't propose to have it wrung by hands like the Red Cardinal's. I guess the mountains afford the safest place for me just now. It looks cowardly, but I don't want to be noosed by a lot of howling devils, such as will be on the war-path if I have finished Rutherford."

He looked out, and seemed to be satisfied that the coast was clear.

Cool to the last, he walked slowly down the street toward the mountain-mines, and it was not long before his little figure had been lost to view.

The passes soon concealed him even from the keenest eyes, and, once among them, the fugitive began to map out certain plans for the future.

Meantime, half a dozen men had helped Rutherford from the saloon to his house, passing the door in which still stuck the iron knife Captain Cobra had left there.

The red rough bled profusely, but was not much hurt.

Major Midget's bullet had plowed along one cheek, laying bare the bone, and promising a scar that would mark the Cardinal for life.

"Don't touch him," Rutherford said, a dozen times to the men who wanted to rush like a pack of wolves upon the little man at that time preparing for flight in anticipation of just such an event. "I guess I pressed him a little too hard. He had to come back at me with the revolver, for I was about to twist his neck. Let him go."

"But he called you—"

"There! let that pass," interrupted the Cardinal. "One of these days we may come together, when I will get even with him, but now I prefer to see every hand withheld."

And then, with his face dressed and great clots of his own blood on the red beard, the chief of the Silver Serpents was left alone to reflect over the events of the last few hours, and to curse in secret two men who had played a prominent part in them.

There was some excitement in camp when it became known that Major Midget had gone away.

The little man had shown himself a coward.

His name was bandied from lip to lip with coarse jest and oath, and if the men of Santa Leo had known where to find him, it is probable that Rutherford's injunctions would not have been obeyed.

The lengthening day had passed the meridian, and the sun was going down the western slope.

"Captain Thor," spoke a little man with one eye, who stole into Rutherford's chamber, and found him asleep on his cot.

It was Caliban, the Cardinal's housekeeper and companion.

The giant did not move.

Caliban bent above the sleeper and watched him closely a few moments.

Then one of his fingers pressed the unwounded cheek, and Rutherford looked up.

"A letter," said Caliban, holding up a piece of folded paper.

The Red Cardinal was in a sitting posture in a second, and the missive was in his hand.

"Who brought it?" he asked, glancing at Caliban.

"It came from Dolores."

The name seemed to send a tremor through the fingers already at work opening the letter.

A letter from the Angel of the camp—from Madam Marcia's child, and to him?

Captain Thor was mystified.

A minute later he had the writing before him and almost at a single glance he read the inquiry it contained.

It ran thus:

"CAPTAIN RUTHERFORD:—Will you grant me an interview to-day?"
DOLORES."

"Tell her yes," said the Cardinal, glancing up at his attendant.

"Do you mean—"

"Dolores?—yes. Say to her that I will see her right away."

"Here?"

"Here!"

Caliban withdrew, and Rutherford, crossing the room, surveyed his bandaged face in a mirror.

"Why does she seek this interview?" mused he, coming back to the cot which he placed in presentable condition, after which he took a chair, and began to wait for Dolores.

Ten minutes had not elapsed ere he heard voices beyond the door, and then he saw the one eye of Caliban, accompanied by the pretty and resolute face of Dolores.

The girl stopped the moment she saw the picture in the room, but the grim smile of Rutherford seemed to reassure her and she came forward.

"A bullet along the cheek is better than one inside," said Rutherford. "Major Midget has had the honor of marking me for life, and Captain Cobra has walked off with a whole skin—two remarkable events for one day, eh, girl?"

Dolores smiled faintly, and hoped that the mark would not be so bad as to disfigure its possessor.

"You think my beauty can be spoiled, then," laughed the red rough. "I never had an over supply of the article—not enough, I fear, to make an impression on a girl like you."

The fair visitor colored, but finding herself alone with Rutherford—Caliban having been dismissed by a look—the mantling flush disappeared and she came nearer without fear.

"I am going away," said the girl.

"From Santa Leo?" cried the man in the chair.

"From Santa Leo."

"But you must not. The world lies beyond. Your friends are here."

"You forget, Captain Rutherford, that I am oath-bound—that I must keep my vow even though the effort takes me to the uttermost parts of the world. I have sworn to discover the murderer of Madam Marcia. I reject the theory of suicide."

The Red Cardinal sat looking at her with a steady stare, wondering why she should come to him with the announcement of her intended departure.

"I want to make no mistake," continued Dolores. "Not for the world would I visit vengeance upon the head of the wrong man. My mother had an enemy whose hatred dates back beyond her coming to Santa Leo. I want to trace that hatred up—step by step, link by link, as it were. Then there can be no mistake; then when I deal the blow the guilty will suffer."

"But we can't let you go," answered Rutherford.

"I know the mountains. You need not send guard or guide with me."

He leaned back and studied her intently several seconds.

"You will be on Captain Cobra's trail," said he.

"But I will not keep it," was the quick response. "I am not following the man of mystery, but a mystery itself."

"He saw you before the trial?"

"He did."

"Had he seen you before?"

"I think not."

"What did Captain Cobra tell you, Dolores?"

"No secrets, you may depend on it, Captain Thor."

"But he came from your house armed for the encounter which afterward took place."

"Did he say so?"

"No," confessed the Red Cardinal. "But circumstances speak louder than words. The assassin with the iron blade is reaching the end of his tether. The last of his knives is now in yonder door. If there is a secret connected with Captain Cobra's visit to you, don't let me rob you of it. But you cannot quit Santa Leo on a mission of danger, mystery, if not death itself."

Dolores drew back from the giant, looking at him the while.

"I was not aware that I could be detained," she answered calmly, but with decision. "My mother's spirit urges me away. The voice of vengeance is the call to duty. I am going to the trail. It may bring me back to Santa Leo. It may environ me with perils and test my faith and courage a hundred times, but the child of Madam Marcia must not flinch."

Dolores laid her hand on the latch at her side. With a farewell look at Rutherford she opened the door and was about to leave him alone when he lifted his hand.

"I forbid!" he exclaimed in tones of command. "The chief of the Silver Serpents orders you to remain in Santa Leo until he sees fit to let you depart."

In a moment Dolores dropped the half-raised latch and moved a step forward white of face and resolute.

"I own no authority within the limits of this mountain camp!" she exclaimed. "I go to the trail of vengeance because the dead points to it as the path of duty. The oath of Dolores stands recorded in heaven. She will keep it to the letter or break it altogether. Captain Thor, you must not stop the daughter of the woman whose past life was the one thing she hated. Good-by."

The Red Cardinal was on his feet while the girl's last word yet rung in his ears.

He spoke one word:

"Caliban?"

In another instant the figure of the one-eyed guard bounded into the room and looked at his master for orders.

Dolores saw the glance and fathomed its meaning.

"Your Cerberus must not interfere with my resolve," said she covering Caliban with her finger. "I am not to be detained or turned back by a being like him. Let him keep his distance, for if I am followed by a spy from Santa Leo, I'll turn on the trail and rid myself of his presence."

Caliban did not move, but Dolores saw the one eye glitter and the long thug-like hands clinch at his sides.

"Remember! your servant follows me at his peril!" continued the girl. "If my trail brings me back to Santa Leo well and good. If it keeps me away forever there will be none to regret the loss. Now, Caliban, remain with your master. A dog at the heels of Dolores will prove disastrous—to the dog!" And then Rutherford and his man exchanged astonished looks alone.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ANOTHER VICTIM.

THE next morning in Santa Leo was destined to announce a startling discovery to the whole camp.

The door of one of the shanties near the end of a certain street was found wide open and the sunshine pouring in fell upon a stiffened corpse in the middle of the room.

This was not all.

In the breast of the dead man who was a member of the Red Cardinal's band stuck a dagger with an iron blade, and in one of the rigid hands was found the warning which the tough had not obeyed.

Thor Rutherford nursing his wrath over Dolores's departure heard the news with compressed lips.

"Captain Cobra is still at work," thought he. "This proves that Monte has not found him." And then a startling idea entered his head: "What if he has found Monte?"

Among those who came to consult the Cardinal concerning the tragedy which had taken place in the night was one who told him a secret.

"Jose got the warning some time ago," said this man.

"I never heard of it," replied Rutherford.

"He kept it a secret as well as he could. I happen to know that a week ago he found the iron blade sticking in his door. It pinned the warning to the wood, and he was given a week to vacate his shanty or take the consequences of a refusal."

"And he took them?"

"It seems so."

Rutherford was silent for a moment.

"Captain Cobra is as swift as he is merciless," he said when he resumed. "We had him in the toils yesterday and let him walk away."

"We missed our chance," answered the man. "Now he comes back and gives Jose the iron blade."

Half an hour later the body of Captain Cobra's victim was taken to the mountain without ceremony and left there to keep others company.

By and by it came to the knowledge of all that Jose had received the proper notification, but had refused to obey it, preferring to stiffen his neck and pay the penalty. There were those who assembled in little groups and recalled the fact that the dead man once dwelt in the Shasta country—that he was a member of the conspiracy formed by the Red Cardinal to break

down one Colonel Midas's bonanza king. The men remembered, too, that Jose afterward sought the wild Southwest border where his life had been a succession of wild adventures as gambler, bandit and desperado.

Rutherford thought of these things, too.

He had Caliban the one-eyed to help him and the two talked a long time in the Cardinal's cabin.

"Don't you ever think that you might be next?" queried Rutherford leering over his bandaged cheek at his companion.

Caliban shrugged his misshapen shoulders.

"I've thought of that," said he, "but I haven't been idle. I guess I'm prepared for Captain Iron-blade."

"Prepared for him?" echoed Rutherford.

"Ay."

"How prepared?"

The one-eyed got upon his feet and opened his bosom.

"Ho! a breast-plate!" exclaimed the Silver Serpent fixing his gaze upon a shirt which seemed to consist of a lot of steel rings ingeniously fastened together.

"It is nothing less—a triumph of inventive power," was the response accompanied by one of Caliban's grins. "I haven't been idle, Captain Thor. I've spent a good deal of time in the workshops and the product of my skill—the vest I wear, is warranted to turn the point of the best knife in Christendom!"

"Even Captain Cobra's?"

"Even his!" said Caliban.

Rutherford shook his head dubiously.

"Let me show you," continued Caliban quickly. "An inventor should have confidence in his work."

The next moment the one-eyed dwarf of Santa Leo was divesting himself of the steel vest.

The Cardinal said nothing but leaned back in his chair and looked on with an amused smile.

Caliban crossed the room and placed the breast-plate on the wall in a manner that presented its full front to his master. Then he stepped back with a glitter of triumph in his solitary orb.

"Knife or pistol, which shall it be, master?" he said with a low bow to Rutherford.

"Test it to suit yourself," smiled the Silver Serpent.

"I see! You haven't much faith in the plate."

There was no reply. Caliban drew from beneath his coat a formidable-looking bowie, the hilt of which he clutched eagerly with his long fingers.

"The knife test first!" cried he. "Look out, Captain Thor!"

The next moment he lunged at the steel vest with the fury of a Malay, and Rutherford saw the blade descend three times, driven downward with the powerful strength for which Caliban was famous.

After the third blow the One-eyed came back to the table and presented the knife, with the point missing.

Rutherford looked amazed.

"Not satisfied yet, eh?" laughed Caliban. "The vest that breaks steel will flatten lead."

"He stepped aside, with a revolver in his hand. The Red Cardinal saw him level the weapon at the novel target, and fire at the center."

As the smoke cleared away the figure of Caliban rushed forward, and Rutherford saw him stoop beneath the mark.

A second afterward something fell upon the table before him, and he saw there a flattened bullet.

It was wonderful!

"Bring me the vest," commanded Rutherford.

It was done.

"Can you make me another just like this?" asked the giant, catching the sparkling eye in the odd-looking head across the table.

"I have one made for you, master," was the answer. "I did not wish to offer it until I thought you would be apt to accept. If Jose had possessed the breast-plate, Captain Cobra could not have driven the iron blade to his heart."

Meantime Rutherford was handling the ingenious piece of workmanship with much critical curiosity. It was light, flexible and very strong. He saw that it could be worn under the ordinary clothing, and the tests he had just witnessed had convinced him of its merits.

"I'll accept the one you have made me, Caliban," he remarked at length. "Let me see what sort of tailor you are."

The little man left the room, and soon came back, bearing in his hands an exact duplicate of the breastplate he had exhibited.

Rutherford accepted it with a smile, and compared it with the one he had examined.

"Captain Cobra has a powerful arm," said the Cardinal.

"Is it swifter than a bullet?"

"It cannot be."

"Then, the coat of mail protects against the hooded mystery of the mountains," exclaimed Caliban.

Rutherford said no more, but proceeded to

don the vest with the assistance of his companion, and in a short time he was pleased to pass several compliments to Caliban's skill as a tailor.

"Let me test your vest, master," said the one-eyed, drawing back with a new knife in his hands.

The Silver Serpent hesitated.

"What! do you distrust my invention?" laughed Caliban.

"I don't invite experiments," answered Rutherford.

"Oh, you prefer to wait until Captain Cobra tests it in earnest!" and the dwarf put up the knife with reluctance though he eyed a certain spot above Rutherford's heart which he had mentally marked for his target.

When Caliban retired from Rutherford's presence he passed to another part of the house, opened a door which revealed a flight of steps leading apparently into the earth, and disappeared.

In a little while he entered a small room which was a veritable workshop. There were visible several benches and large quantities of tools of all kinds, showing that the man with the single eye was more than an ordinary person.

Caliban advanced to one of the benches above which burned the only light the place contained, and took up a half-finished breast-plate of the kind he had just fitted upon the Red Cardinal's form.

A minute later he was at work on the armor and soon became oblivious to his surroundings in the task before him.

"They don't know me as an armorer," chuckled Caliban as his fingers deftly linked the steel rings together and he bent over his work, his long hair streaming over his shoulders. "I have watched the movements of Captain Cobra for months, and I've brought my ingenuity to bear against him. I don't want to feel the point of his dagger. Jose is another of the old band. He was once a power in Shasta Land when we had Colonel Midas to fight, and afterward he was Count Cactus's right bower. I wouldn't be afraid to follow Dolores protected as I am by the magic armor of the century. By heavens! I'd agree to track Captain Cobra himself. Why didn't the Cardinal send Caliban after him instead of Monte?"

The one-eyed genius of Santa Leo kept at his work until he had completed several rows of the steel rings, then putting the unfinished vest away, he stretched himself on his stool.

"I'll look at it again!" said he, darting suddenly toward the bench, and opening a drawer in the wall beyond.

He took from the drawer a packet, which he opened nervously, and revealed a ring, which he held forward in the light.

"I'll bet my head—and that's the most valuable thing I've got—that this ring once graced Captain Cobra's hand!" exclaimed Caliban. "I wouldn't show it to the captain, for I've kept the secret too long. If I am right, about a dozen men in Santa Leo ought to be wearing steel vests, for, by the eternal! the band that once wore this bauble is a hunter of men, and its master knows where his quarry hides."

Caliban might have proceeded if a step had not startled him.

He turned half around and looked toward the door, then uttered a wild cry and almost fell from his seat, for Rutherford, with the step of a lynx and blood-shot eyes, was coming forward.

Caliban tried to hide the ring, but failed.

The huge figure of the Red Cardinal darted at him, a hand twice as large as his own clutched his throat, and a shaking that seemed to break every bone in his body, shook the keepsake from his bosom, and it rolled like a golden hoop across the floor.

CHAPTER XXV.

TESTED.

AT nearly the same moment that witnessed the scene in Caliban's workshop, a figure which looked only half human was dragging itself through a dim light that partially revealed a bit of water and some broken wall.

The surroundings indicated a subterranean place of some kind, and the grotesque object seemed a fitting tenant.

At first glance, the reader, could he have been there, would not have recognized the crawler, but a closer study would have told him that the underground Styx had given up Don Caddo, the Carquinez Cat.

He no longer resembled the dandy he had been in other days when in gaudy garments and a waxed mustache, he had spitted feminine hearts in the border term, nor was he the same Don Caddo whom we saw last at the faro tables of the Cold Deck.

Major Midget had failed to find him in the heart of Madam Marcia's mine. Perhaps the little man had not followed the buried river long enough, or the waters may have thrown Don Caddo upon the bank in some unexplored nook, leaving him to recover at his leisure from the treatment he had received at the Red Cardinal's hands.

At any rate, the man from Carquinez was still

alive, and the darkness of the dead woman's bonanza hemmed him in.

There was a wild, almost demoniac glare in the eyes that burned in Don Caddo's head while he moved along with unsteady step and weakened frame.

Many hours had passed since his startling adventure with Rutherford. He had not counted them, but the time seemed an age, and it appeared to him that he was dragging his body over the dark stones of perdition.

By and by, whether guided by faith or helped by fortune, he came rather suddenly upon a streak of warm sunlight.

He leaned against the wall that held the sun-beam and gasped for joy.

After awhile he moved on again, and emerging at last from the mouth of Madam Marcia's mine, he uttered an exclamation of triumph.

His torn clothes and bruised face rendered him almost unrecognizable even in the sunshine.

He looked toward the cabins of Santa Leo and smiled.

"I'm coming back from the dead," he said, while the smile lingered. "The claws of the Carquinez Cat will soon be sharp again, and the Satan of the camp shall wish he had finished me in the mine."

Nobody seemed to see Don Caddo as he crept down the shaded side of the street.

The killing of Jose was still the absorbing topic everywhere, and the body of Captain Cobra's victim had just been added to the sleepers on the mountain.

Don Caddo reached his shanty and went in. The larder had not suffered during his absence, and he found enough in it to appease the pangs of wolfish hunger that had gnawed at his vitals.

He did not emerge from the house until the sun had passed the meridian. Perhaps he had recovered some of his weakened powers by a long sleep. He needed strength.

All at once his door opened and he stepped into the street.

"My God!" exclaimed a voice so near that Don Caddo whirled and stood face to face with the man he had startled.

"Aha! Sultan!" cried the man from Carquinez. "Do I come back as from the tomb?"

"You do, indeed." And the speaker looked Don Caddo over from head to foot and back again. "In Heaven's name where have you been?"

"It would be easier to say where I haven't been," laughed the Carquinez Cat. "Come up and tell me what has happened, Sultan."

"Sid Sultan, Sam Shott's right-hand man, was the best man Don Caddo could have met. He was full of information, and having a glib tongue he told the story of events since the Cat's disappearance in a manner that left nothing to be desired."

Don Caddo leaned against the logs of his cabin and did not miss a word. During the entire narrative he never removed his eyes from Sultan.

What the miner said seemed like a dream to the man who had come back.

Captain Cobra escaped, the Red Cardinal shot by Major Midget, Dolores gone away, and last but not least Jose killed by the iron blade within the boundaries of Santa Leo!

"You've piled events one upon the other," said Don Caddo at the end of Sultan's narrative. "Maybe if I had been here things might not have taken that course, but no matter now. How badly is the Cardinal hurt?"

"A flesh wound, but a mark for life."

"Did Major Midget shoot to kill?"

"I don't know."

"He is a better shot than that."

"He ought to be."

"I've seen him do better," answered Don Caddo, a sly twinkle in his eyes. "What took Dolores away?"

"She has taken up the trail."

"What trail?"

"The trail of the mystery which surrounds Madam Marcia's death."

"Where does she expect to strike it?"

"I cannot tell you."

Don Caddo's eyes wandered up the street toward the Square.

"Does the Cardinal keep his house?" he suddenly inquired.

"He has been there since he was shot."

"Come, Sultan. Will you go along?"

"Whither?"

"First to the Cold Deck."

"And then?"

"The Carquinez Cat wants to show the Cardinal that his claws don't need sharpening."

Sid Sultan drew back a step and looked at the man who had spoken with the utmost coolness imaginable.

"Are you going to push a quarrel?" he queried. "The death of Jose has knitted the Silver Serpents closer together than ever before."

"Indeed!" and Don Caddo affected a surprise he did not really feel. "I know what that means, Sultan. The hand sees the handwriting on the wall. Did you ever read the scrawl traced by an unknown hand on the stones in Madam Marcia's mine?"

"No."

"Well, it reads: 'The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind the entire grist.'"

"Don't you know who put the sentence where you say it is?" asked Sultan.

"I have an idea," was the reply. "But let us go up to the Cold Deck. I don't want to play. I could not put a dollar on the board now, for I've come back from Charon's ferry without one."

The following moment Sultan found himself walking alongside of Don Caddo toward the famous saloon of Santa Leo.

More than once he caught himself eying the man with a curiosity that had taken deep root. He could see that some desperate resolution had taken hold of Don Caddo's heart; the compressed lips and the assumed coolness could not deceive him.

There was a buzz of excitement among the afternoon gamblers as the Carquinez Cat crossed the threshold and swept the interior with a single glance.

He walked to the bar and took a moderate glass of his favorite spirits, then leaned against the counter and showed himself to the men at the various tables.

"Now for the next play," he said, with a quick look at Sultan. "We will visit the lion in his den. The cat and the lion, ha, ha!" and he started toward the door with an eagerness that caught every eye.

Sultan hesitated.

He had followed Don Caddo long enough. It was not his intention, as Sam Shott's best friend, to be drawn into the quarrel then existing between the Carquinez Cat and Thor Rutherford.

He followed Don Caddo to the door, and stopped there.

"Don't come, if you think it a bit of bad policy," said the man from the Styx, looking over his shoulder from the Square. "I don't want your master drawn into my quarrel. A man who has come back from the regions of death, ought to have a right to settle with the dog who sent him thither."

He turned away, and went toward the Red Cardinal's house, which he could see from the Square, and Sid Sultan watched him with breathless interest.

"A fool in high boots!" ejaculated the overseer. "A fly in a cup of poison!" And then he saw Don Caddo start across the street with his eye still riveted upon the house of his rival and foe.

Suddenly, to Sultan's astonishment, the door of the Red Cardinal's house flew open.

The next instant the burly figure of Rutherford appeared on the step.

Even from the threshold of the Cold Deck Sultan could see the bandaged face, and, he thought, the flashing eyes above the rags.

Don Caddo stopped in his tracks.

He was in the middle of the street, not more than thirty feet from the Silver Serpent Chief.

"That's far enough!" Sultan heard the Cardinal say, in sternly measured tones. "By Jove! you seem to be a cat not only in name but in longevity!"

"I'm Don Caddo, cat and man combined!" was the answer. "So Captain Cobra, ere he left, called you Count Cactus. Did he go into the details of your roseate history, or read from memory one of the many proclamations which offered a reward for the count's head? Ho! ho! Captain Thor marked for life by Major Midget, until Captain Cobra comes the second and last time with the iron dagger! I want to say that Don Caddo still retains his old claws. They're ready at any time for the six-foot poltroon of Santa Leo, marked for life by an atom. Were I thus disgraced, I'd hang myself with a stolen lasso."

A cry that sounded like a deep roar of rage, broke from the Cardinal's throat.

He seemed to throw himself into the street. Sultan and forty other spectators held their breath.

As to Don Caddo, he threw his body back, though he did not move from his tracks.

His right hand which had covered Rutherford in derision a moment before dropped suddenly to his side, was seen to clutch at something there, and then an object glittered in the sun.

The Red Cardinal did not seem to mind this.

He came forward apparently unarmed, and as he reached for Don Caddo with both hands the knife of the man from Carquinez struck him squarely in the breast.

Instead of a cry of pain a metallic click was heard, and Don Caddo with a face as white as death stared at the dagger-hilt he held in his hand.

The blow had snapped the blade!

CHAPTER XXVI.

CUPID IN THE GAME.

THIS successful test of Caliban's armor sent a grim smile of satisfaction across Rutherford's face.

He almost laughed at the consternation which had seized upon Don Caddo, who stood before him with the useless dagger-hilt still in his grip.

All at once the man from Carquinez threw

the dagger at his feet and flashed a look of mingled contempt and scorn upon the Red Cardinal.

"A dozen vests of steel shall avail nothing in the end!" he exclaimed, leveling his finger at his foe. "I thank Heaven that Caliban's ingenuity has protected his master. I don't want your blood, Captain Thor, though no man has a better right to shed it than I."

He whirled without giving the Serpent a chance to reply, and the silent spectators of the meeting saw Rutherford looking queerly at the figure walking across the Square.

"I wanted no better test than this," said the Red Cardinal, glancing at the broken knife which lay at his feet. "Vengeance doubled Don Caddo's strength and he did not spare it when he struck. I barely felt a jar. The armor resisted bravely, thanks to Caliban, and I need not fear the iron blade of the man mystery."

Not once did the Carquinez Cat turn to look at his antagonist, and when he reached his shanty and glanced toward the place of the encounter from its door he found it deserted.

Rutherford had gone back to his own dwelling where he opened his shirt and looked among the closely-knitted rings of his breast-plate for the mark of Don Caddo's knife, but found it not.

By and by a door opened, and the searching eye of Caliban appeared.

The dwarf was about to withdraw, when Rutherford commanded him to come forward.

There was a grin on Caliban's face as if he had already forgotten the choking he had lately received in the work-shop, when the iron grip of his stalwart master shook from his grasp a peculiar and costly ring.

"Did it resist?" he asked.

"You should have seen the meeting, Caliban," answered the Red Cardinal, well pleased. "His blade broke at the hilt, and he threw it away in disgust."

"I thought so."

"You saw us, then?"

"From the window."

"I cannot find a dent in the armor."

"A knife makes none," was the quick response.

Caliban looked at Rutherford's hands.

"I'm not wearing the ring," said the Serpent with a smile. "Are you sure you kept back nothing?"

"I am."

The one-eyed armorer of Santa Leo spoke with some petulance, as if he recalled the choking he had received.

"The ring once belonged to Colonel Midas of Shasta?"

"It did."

"How many rings had he?"

"I don't know. He was fond of jewelry."

"I know he was rich enough to indulge every fancy. The ring we found on the fingers of his mummy established his identity."

Caliban bowed with a singular smile at his lips, but said nothing.

"Do you know that you haven't worked in secret?" suddenly asked the Red Cardinal.

"Who knows that I make ring armor—the best in the world?"

"Don Caddo."

"Did he say so?"

"He gave you credit for your genius after the meeting between us."

"The Cat has played spy!" exclaimed Caliban. "But never mind. All the gold in California could not buy from me a plate to cover his heart."

"You don't like the Carquinez kitten."

Caliban showed his teeth in a malicious smile. It was answer enough.

Meantime, the sun sinking toward the western horizon, where a bank of dark clouds rose like the tumbled peaks of a mountain range, had cast the greater part of the wild camp in shadow.

Don Caddo, looking up at the nearest mountain from the window of his shanty, saw on the lofty trail an object which to his eagle eyes resolved itself into a mounted man.

In an instant a thought of Captain Cobra crossed his mind.

The figure seemed to come to the very fringe of the trail, where it remained motionless in the sunlight that still rested there.

The man from Carquinez watched it with breathless interest. A glass would have aided him, but he had none at his command, and he was obliged to content himself with the only view to be obtained.

After an apparent inspection of the camp, which lasted ten minutes, the figure on the mountain faded slowly from sight, Don Caddo watching it until it had disappeared, and for several seconds afterward he continued to gaze at the deserted spot.

In his thoughts he had seen the Hooded Mystery of California.

Captain Cobra had come back after another victim. The iron blade, merciless and sure, was about to find another heart, and Jose would have a fellow-sleeper in the mountain cemetery!

The mystery which surrounded Damago Dan's death had not been cleared up. Nobody

now believed that Captain Cobra had taken this life, and there were some who thought they had a clue to the crime. But whether they had or not, they did not make public their belief, and Major Midget's friend was sleeping unavenged.

Night had come once more when Sam Shott, the American nabob, heard a nervous rap at his door.

He was at a loss to know who would be guilty of this piece of politeness in Santa Leo, and when he invited his visitor in he found himself face to face with Don Caddo.

Once more the man from Carquinez looked like his old self though traces of his battle with death in Madam Marcia's mine still remained.

He wore a suit of gaudy clothes, such as he generally affected, and the black mustache had been waxed to needle-like points.

He met Shott's look of surprise with a gracious smile, and dropped into the empty chair with the air of a gallant.

"I beg your pardon, Captain Sam," began Don Caddo. "I like to get to the point as soon as possible. Why did you let her go?"

The bonanza king seemed to start.

"You mean Dolores?" said he.

"I mean Dolores," was the response.

"I knew nothing of her departure until a note found in her house told me all."

Don Caddo looked disappointed.

"Are we to be enemies?" he asked.

"Enemies?" echoed Shott.

"That's it—enemies," repeated the man from Carquinez.

"I don't understand you."

A smile passed over the yellow face of Don Caddo.

He leaned toward the handsome figure and glowing face of Santa Leo's mine-king and seemed to study it for a moment.

"I guess I've been mistaken all this time," said he, still watching it. "You don't love Dolores after all. You are the girl's friend, but no more."

Sam Shott did not reply.

"Dolores of Santa Leo is the light of Don Caddo's life," continued the Cat from Carquinez. "He would wade through the burning rivers of Tartarus to win her smile. Captain Sam, you have lifted a load from my heart. We are not to be enemies, but friends. I can now go ahead and fight my battles for the prize in the game—the hand of Dolores."

He stopped as suddenly as he had begun.

"You look at me like a man in a maze," he continued. "Where have your eyes been all this time? I haven't tried to conceal my passion. By Heaven! I couldn't do so. The girl took my heart the moment my eyes caught sight of her. Madam Marcia knew what was going on. She said nothing though, but her eyes had a language which wasn't hard to interpret."

"What did it say?"

"It wasn't very complimentary," grinned Don Caddo, "but I would have overcome her scruples. Hang it all! woman is an enigma very difficult of solution. I've been all my life solving her." Don Caddo gave his mustaches a sharper point. "I am going to win the play," he went on. "I am opposed by the Red Cardinal whose steel vest broke one of my claws today. He has the Silver Serpents at his back, but look here!—I am armed anew." And the speaker produced a beautiful dagger with an ivory-ornamented hilt and held it forth in his palm.

Sam Shott looked from the weapon into the black eyes of its owner.

"Captain Cobra fights unconsciously for me," resumed the man from Carquinez, at the same time leaving his chair, and making a line halfway across the table with the point of the blade. "This is the line, Captain Sam. On this side stand the Red Cardinal and his gang; on that we have arrayed our forces. In the background looms up the shadow of the hooded head and the iron knife. We are the stronger; we must win. The prize is here," his finger designated a certain spot on the table and rested there. "Dolores seeking the slayer of Madam Marcia among the mountains is wasting her time. She should have looked for the trail nearer home."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Shott.

"You are the person who found Madam Marcia dead in her underground office."

"I am."

"You did not look for the murderer then?"

"I did not."

"The trail was fresh then. Among the shadows of her mine stood the person who had just taken her life. He came away with victory in his eyes."

Sam Shott was bending forward, excitement uppermost in his eyes.

"Why didn't you tell this to Dolores?" he cried. "It would have kept her here."

"Gods! I didn't get an opportunity. I was winded by a bullet in the heart of the mine and pitched backward into the Styx. When I came back to life many hours had elapsed, and Dolores was gone. They think the Cat has broken his last claw! They are fools enough to believe that the steel armor which came from the devilish brain of one-eyed Caliban has broken Don Caddo's nerve. Ha! ha! let them think so."

Captain Sam; we are not enemies. You are Dolores's friend—I her lover."

The hand of the bonanza nabob reached out until it nearly touched Don Caddo.

"I am the girl's guardian," said he. "Madam Marcia made me so in the last paper she ever penned."

The man from Carquinez fell back.

"Then, as her guardian, choose now between Don Caddo and the Red Cardinal," he cried.

"Between cat and tiger?" laughed the bonanza boss. "We'll wait till the game is ended!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LAWYER BLOODHOUND'S HUNT.

THE reader has not forgotten, while keeping track of the several characters of our story, the prosecuting attorney of Santa Leo.

In other words, he has remembered the sending forth of Monte the lawyer upon Captain Cobra's trail.

The Red Cardinal, baffled in his attempts to end the hooded man's career by the Tribunal of the camp, wanted to discover his secret haunts, and to this end he had sent out his trail-dog who knew how to follow a mountain scent with the pertinacity of a real bloodhound.

Monte, as we know, had accepted the commission with some reluctance. He knew the deeds of the mysterious wielder of the iron blade, and, as if he had studied the work it had done and seen therein the approaching shadow of a like fate, he naturally recoiled from the task thus suddenly placed before him.

But, bound to the Red Cardinal by an oath, he armed himself for the adventure, and took up the trail with a resolution to finish it satisfactorily to his master or perish in the attempt.

Captain Cobra, however, was not so easily tracked. The man in the mask was not likely to leave a plain trail behind him, and Monte soon discovered that he had accepted a mission full of perplexities and toil.

Night found him apparently as far from success as ever.

He had abandoned the horse which had carried him the greater part of the day, and in the scattered light of a few stars stood in a portion of the Santa Barbara Hills, with silence on every side.

The lawyer beagle had plenty of time for reflection. More than once a thought of desertion had entered his mind.

He could keep on toward the south and quit the district of Santa Leo. He knew the land that stretched beyond the cramped view the stars afforded; but always one thing held him back.

"Men have deserted him," Monte said to himself, speaking in audible tones. "They have broken their oaths and sought other masters, or tried to shift for themselves; but with what result? They have been found dead in camps, on the deserts of the Southwest, or among the mountains. Captain Thor has hunted the deserter with the same pertinacity that characterizes the man with the iron blade. I can't afford to desert the Red Cardinal. A man living in the shadow of a mysterious death had better die at once and have done with it. No! I am going to hunt Captain Cobra. More than that—I intend to find him!"

During this speech Monte was looking over the fringe of the trail into a little basin, across which ran a bridle-path which was discernible to the naked eye. He was barely fifty feet above the hollow and the starlight seemed to concentrate its strength there, showing him the stunted cacti with wonderful distinctness.

All at once there came upon this scene an object which in a little while resolved itself into a mounted man.

A thrill of excitement took possession of Monte's mind. He leaned forward and gazed at the figures below.

Captain Cobra was below him!

There could be no mistake.

The lawyer trail-dog saw the well-poised figure in the saddle and the dark hood.

He knew the horse as well as he did his master, for the man of mystery and his steed were inseparables.

For five minutes Monte gazed upon the scourge of California sitting in full view in the center of the basin. He forgot that he was armed.

Holding to a stout bush at his right he bent over the edge of the path and studied Captain Cobra with all the interest of the occasion.

"Does he always keep his face hooded?"

Monte involuntarily asked himself. "Is he so afraid of spies that he never lets the air fan his cheeks? By Jove! I'd surrender my hopes of Heaven for a second's look at that face even with this distance between us! But I can see it! I have this. What made me forget myself?" and the rapid movement of his hand drew a handsome six-shooter which he cocked as he bent forward as before, still clutching the bush with his left foot on the very fringe of the trail.

The next moment there was a motion in the basin which checked Monte's arm. Captain Cobra removed the hat he wore.

"Is the mask to follow?" eagerly exclaimed the watcher. "Am I to see his face without

having to send a bullet through his heart for a glimpse? I'll wait a moment."

The Red Cardinal's sleuth-hound measured time correctly.

He saw the hand of Captain Cobra seize the hood and jerk it from his face. Monte—the same movement Sam Shott saw at the beginning of our story.

He observed first the long hair which hung in heavy masses around the shoulders, then, as the head of the strange man was lifted to catch the night wind fairly in his face, he saw the countenance so pertinaciously hidden from thousands.

Of course the light was not strong enough to show him every line of that dreaded face, but a man with an excellent memory can supply a few needed links, and Monte did so with astonishing rapidity.

He gave one look at the face above the saddle and started back with a sharp cry on his lips, and his fingers sinking as it were into the butt of the revolver.

The next instant the edge of the trail gave way, and before he could recover, Monte of Santa Leo felt himself slipping downward into the very basin occupied by Captain Cobra!

He clung to the bush and the six-shooter; but soon finding that he must relinquish one he loosened his hold on the former and descended feet-foremost through a cloud of dust and rapidly, toward the very spot occupied by his quarry.

The prosecutor of the Red Cardinal's Tribunal had no time in which to arrange a plan of campaign. He went downward too rapidly for that.

When he stopped suddenly he kept his feet and looked for Captain Cobra.

The horse was as firmly planted in the center of the basin as before, and in the saddle still sat the man he had encountered, but with the inevitable hood over his face and a pair of glittering eyes studying him with fateful curiosity.

Monte took a step forward. His revolver, which had not been discharged by the rapid descent, was still in his hand, and one of his fingers touched the trigger.

"Halt!" came suddenly through the mask, and the raised hand of Captain Cobra covered the lawyer's breast.

Monte obeyed.

"You have tracked me, Monte of Santa Leo," continued the mystery.

"What if I have?" was the answer, spoken in tones of defiance.

"The dog obeys his master," Captain Cobra went on. "Go back and say that you have found the man with the iron knife."

Monte did not move.

"What! won't your master believe without proof?" laughed the Mystery. "Come here, Monte. I pinned your indictment to the table of the court before I left Santa Leo. It was a clever document. I could have spitted its maker's heart as easily as I transfixed the charge; but I withheld the blade."

By this time Monte stood within five feet of the man on horseback. He was looking up into the eyes that shone behind the hood, wondering what their master was thinking about and what would follow next.

Captain Cobra studied Monte for a moment, and then one hand disappeared in his bosom.

"Take this back—proof that you found me," he said, bringing forth one the famous iron knives, and extending it to the astonished man on the ground.

Monte straightened and shook his head.

"I will not!" he exclaimed.

"Ah! you seek more than the sign of Captain Cobra's calling!" was the answer.

"I know you!"

The occupant of the saddle started, and Monte would have given much at that moment if he had held his tongue.

"So you have seen the hidden face uncovered?" continued Captain Cobra. "Can't a man breathe in God's pure air unmasked without having a spy on the watch? Monte, of Santa Leo, don't you know that your curiosity has forfeited your life?"

A backward spring, and quick and deadly work with the revolver flashed through Monte's mind, but the next second the darting hand of Captain Cobra shook the weapon from his grip, and he was held in his tracks like a man in a vise of steel.

"Who am I?" cried the hooded mystery of the hills. "Nay, you need not answer. Your accursed eyes are too sharp for your own good. Why didn't you hold your tongue? A slip of that unruly member has cost kings their thrones, and better men than you their lives. You will not take the iron knife to your master, Count Cactus, of border days, eh?"

"I will not!"

"Then come with me, Monte. We haven't met for years. You recognized me with the same eagle eyes you possessed in other parts of the country. Years have not dimmed them; time has kept your memory clear. I am glad of it!"

A low laugh followed Captain Cobra's last words, and almost before they had ceased to disturb the echoes of the little basin, Monte found himself walking away alongside the horse

with four fingers under his collar, and a thumb on the outside.

The unexpected and unwished-for had happened.

He was Captain Cobra's prisoner!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DEATH-STING.

THE presence of Don Caddo in Santa Leo was regarded by the Red Cardinal as a standing menace, and no sooner had the Carquinez Cat returned to his cabin than a trap was set to catch him.

Rutherford was anxious to hear from Monte, his spy. Some hours had elapsed since the lawyer's departure on Captain Cobra's trail, and nothing had been heard from him.

There might be a general settlement if the iron knife was not dulled by some shrewd work, and the Cardinal had strong faith in Monte's worth as a tracker of man.

The sun had gone down when he slipped down the stair leading to Caliban's underground workshop, and opening the door softly, he saw the one-eyed armorer leaning forward on his bench with his head between his hands.

For several moments the bearded chief of the Silver Serpents stood on the last step, and watched the figure as it was revealed by the lamp above his head.

The Red Cardinal evidently thought of the choking he had lately administered to his strange house-dog, and he watched Caliban with a smile lingering at his lips.

At last, stepping forward on tip-toe, he craned his head over the dwarf's shoulders and looked at the piece of work which seemed to have fallen from his hands.

Caliban was fast asleep, and as his fingers did not touch the work, Rutherford picked it up and studied it curiously.

He had never seen anything like it, and it was from the first, in his eyes, an astonishing piece of genius.

He held in his hand the exact counterfeit of a scorpion.

It was flexible and life-like—tail, head, and eyes were all correct.

The Red Cardinal did not inspect the sting, which he doubted not was in place, and as deadly as the sting of the real insect; and such was his admiration for Caliban's inventive powers that he handled the object very gingerly.

All at once, while he was thus engaged, the dwarf awoke and looked up.

Perceiving the Red Cardinal at the bench, he became pale, and fell back with a startling cry. At the same time he reached for the scorpion, begging Rutherford not to put his finger where he knew the sting was kept.

"What can it do?" asked the giant of Santa Leo.

"It can kill!"

"This little thing? Pish!"

Caliban colored with indignation.

Without replying he took from a drawer a rubber pad which he placed on the bench before him. Then holding the metallic scorpion several inches above the pad he let it fall, and immediately to Rutherford's astonishment it fastened itself to the rubber like a thing of life and tried to sink its sting again and again into the resisting surface.

It was wonderful.

"Is it armed?" queried the Red Cardinal leaning forward in his eagerness.

"Not now, but the sting has the point of a needle," was the response. "I can throw it across this room and it will stick to anything it meets."

"Where did you learn to make scorpions?"

"Not here," answered Caliban. "I knew how to make them before I ever saw Santa Leo."

"From whom did you learn?"

"Never mind that."

The dwarf had taken the scorpion and was looking at it with glittering eye as it rested on his hand, its various parts shining in the light.

"This would have been the punishment for Captain Cobra!" he suddenly laughed. "A scorpion under the black hood would take it off in a jiffy. The sting sends a thousand tortures through one's blood."

Captain Thor thought of his experience in Madam Marcia's mine when the needle of the mysterious box sent countless agonies through his system—agonies which he had counteracted with copious draughts of another poison at the Cold Deck's bar.

Was not the sting of Caliban's scorpion armed with the same poison?

"Charge it," said Rutherford looking from the single eye to the deadly insect.

"For you?"

"Yes."

Caliban seemed to hesitate.

"You don't like to serve me I see," continued the Red Cardinal with a frown.

"Have I said so?"

"No, but you look that way."

"You choked me once."

Rutherford could not repress a smile.

"I could not help it," he rejoined. "The sight of the ring you were hiding sent my blood

red-hot through my veins. Oh, if you don't want to charge the insect for me put it away."

The speaker pretended to exhibit the utmost indifference, but Caliban was not to be deceived.

He turned to a small drawer on his left, and took from it a vial and several tools.

With the latter he separated the scorpion's tail from the body, and removed the concealed needle or sting, which was a hollow contrivance, even to the needle-point it wore.

The Red Cardinal looked on, saying nothing.

He saw Caliban put a very small quantity of the colorless contents of the vial at the base of the needle, after which he restored the detached tail, shook the insect once, and placed it on the bench with an upward glance of triumph.

"There's death in the tail now, Captain Thor," said he. "Bring me the man of mystery, and I will show you how the scorpion does his work."

Rutherford made no reply for a moment.

"Have you another?" he suddenly asked.

"Not another ready," was the reply.

"Look here, Caliban. I would like to see your scorpion perform his work. You know who has come back to beat me whenever he can—to play the most dangerous trumps he can get against my hand?"

"Don Caddo?" queried Caliban, showing his teeth.

"The Cat from Carquinez!" exclaimed Rutherford. "The triumph of that villain means the end of our reign here."

"Is he so dangerous?"

"In one respect more to be dreaded than Captain Cobra."

"Don Caddo has a knife too, eh?"

"Yes, but your breastplate has armed me against that. It broke his blade, you know."

"Ay, and it can turn the point of the iron knife as easily."

"I don't doubt it."

Caliban was pleased with these compliments; his look showed it.

"As I have said," resumed the Red Cardinal, bending slightly toward the dwarf, "despite his apparent solitariness, Don Caddo is almost as dangerous as your scorpion. He has fought the Silver Serpent secretly ever since we came in contact with him. He now aspires."

"To what?" exclaimed Caliban.

"To the throne," quietly announced Rutherford.

"What! does the Carquinez Cat want to dispossess us?"

"You are discerning, Caliban. The man in high boots and gaudy clothes wants to get to the top round of the ladder. And by going over us, of course."

"He must be checked! Where would my workshop be if he succeeded?"

"Ay, where?" cried the Red Cardinal seeing his opportunity.

The long dark hand of one-eyed Caliban wandered to the scorpion. He picked it up and pushed back his stool.

"Where is he?" he exclaimed.

"Don't spoil all by playing a hasty hand," said Rutherford soothingly.

"What hand can be better than this?" and Caliban held up the insect and laughed until his eye seemed to dance like an animated coal.

"Where is the would-be usurper, Captain Thor?"

"That must be discovered."

"The sooner the better, eh?"

"Yes."

The following minute the scorpion was placed in a box which found its way into Caliban's bosom, and the little man put on his hat.

"Find out first," admonished Rutherford.

"Don Caddo carries a cool hand, a quick eye and a level head. He hasn't his five-and-thirty years for nothing. He knows a snake when he sees it, and as he is acquainted with your inventive genius he will be on the lookout. Caution is the word, Caliban."

During this speech the little man of Santa Leo was looking at Rutherford with an air of impatience.

"As you say, Captain Thor, I'll find him first," said he.

"When will you begin the hunt?"

"Now!"

Ten minutes later the Red Cardinal, alone in one of the rooms above the workshop was thinking of the interview over a bottle of wine.

Caliban had taken his departure.

An hour wore away, then another and another.

Nobody seemed to see the little figure that glided hither and thither with the one eye in its head seeing everything and the feet making no noise on the ground.

The dwarf of Santa Leo was on the trail.

He had looked in upon the gamblers at the Cold Deck, had studied every face for half a second, and not finding his prey there had withdrawn to hunt him elsewhere.

Suddenly Caliban halted and stared at a light which had flashed up like a star in the night.

"He has come home!" exclaimed the scorpion-maker. "I could not wish for him in a better trap. The door stands open and a glass is out in his window. If he shuts the one the other

will serve me just as well. We will see now, Don Caddo, how near you get to the top round of the ladder."

In a little while a figure stood in the shadow thrown by Don Caddo's cabin.

It did not have to crouch, for being Caliban's it was small enough.

The door of the shanty, open when he first saw the light was closed now; but the uncurtained window, with one glass out, showed him the form of Don Caddo as it bent over a table with the shapely yellow hand of the Cat covering a piece of parchment-like paper with writing.

The table was so near the window that Caliban could almost have touched the Red Cardinal's foe.

For some moments he watched him like a hawk. At length his hand went toward his bosom and the boxed scorpion was taken out.

Caliban's fingers lifted the lid and the deadly insect was removed with great care. It squirmed in his grasp like a living thing.

With eyes fastened upon Don Caddo, Caliban moved closer to the window. He saw nothing but the exposed neck of the man from Carquinez, and while he eyed it his hand went up, and then, darting forward, launched the scorpion through the window with a precision which in a moment changed the whole scene beyond!

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE BITER BITTEN.

"A BULL'S-EYE, by Jove!" burst from the throat of Caliban as he kept his station a second, or until he had seen Don Caddo writhing under the sting of the scorpion which had fallen below his collar and fastened itself just out of reach.

The eyes of the man from Carquinez seemed to start from his head. He almost overthrew the table in his agonies, and the one-eyed villain who thoroughly enjoyed the scene looked on with the innate glee of a devil.

Suddenly Caliban turned away and ran over the ground toward his master's house.

He had seen his victim sink exhausted against the wall, his hands clinched and a look of despair in his eyes.

But Don Caddo had no notion of succumbing to the sting of the infernal reptile without a desperate struggle for life.

Caliban had hardly vanished ere he tore his coat from his body and jerked his shirt over his head. As he performed the latter action, something dropped to the floor, and for the first time he saw the cause of his torment.

A strange cry parted his lips as he stooped and seized the scorpion without regard to what the result might be.

A dizziness overcame him, but he shook it off, and went toward the light.

"Another of the devil's inventions!" came in a hiss through his clinched teeth. "If I had him here I'd cram his scorpion into his throat, and hold him till he died! By heavens! they shan't get rid of Don Caddo in this foul manner. They cannot clip the Cat's claws with poisoned scissors. By the soul of the eternal one! Don Caddo will yet play his winning hand! Ha! ha! there's too much at stake to throw up the game even with the poison of the scorpions in one's blood!"

He placed the reptile on the table and crossed the room.

Taking a bottle from a plain side-board in the wall, he held it a full minute to his lips, and then poured the remainder of its contents over his naked back. He repeated this proceeding without producing any signs of drunkenness. His eyes got an unnatural light—a wild, fierce gleam; but nothing more.

It seemed to be a race between the liquor and the poison, and nearly an hour passed before it became apparent which would win.

After a while the interior of Don Caddo's cabin was dark, and there came toward it through the scattered starlight beyond, a stealthy, gliding figure—a figure dwarfish and one-eyed.

Caliban was coming back to make sure that his victim had succumbed to the sting of his scorpion. Perhaps the Red Cardinal had sent him.

At any rate, he was nearing Don Caddo's house with the single orb on the alert, and ears trained to catch the slightest sounds.

Alongside the door, and hidden from the one eye by the darkness, stood a man whose very position told that he knew that the evil genius of Santa Leo was coming back.

He may have seen the figure flit across the bit of lighted street in front of a gambling-den, whose open door revealed the players beyond.

He waited for Caliban as the tiger crouched among the jungle palms waits for the antelope that comes to his jaws.

Don Caddo still felt the sting of the scorpion, but he no longer feared its poison, thanks to the copious draught of fiery liquor he had taken. But, despite it all, his brain was clear, and he itched to meet the little man for whom he waited.

The feet of Caliban neared the door.

They did not halt until they were at the threshold, then the dwarf inventor of Santa Leo

listened with his ear at the broken pane through which he had launched his missile.

Don Caddo, who knew of the proximity of his enemy, did not breathe.

He knew that curiosity would carry Caliban to the extreme, and holding back his eagerness, he waited on.

At last the door opened.

Don Caddo saw in the night-light that came in, the head and shoulders of the Red Cardinal's Cerberus.

He drew back a degree.

"Dead, eh?" said a voice of triumph at the door. "The shanty has become Don Caddo's tomb, and the scorpion has played his role with success."

Then the whole body of the speaker came in.

The next moment the flash of a noiseless lucifer broke the gloom that prevailed, and Don Caddo saw Caliban looking for his victim.

Not until then did he step forward.

He suddenly took one long stride toward the man at the table. It was taken without noise, which rendered the movement the most dangerous.

All at once Caliban looked at Don Caddo, and then—

He seemed to have received a sudden electric shock; he staggered back, dropping the match upon the table, where it flared up anew, and then stood with all his color gone and glared at the man who, in his eye, had come back from the dead!

In an instant Don Caddo covered the remainder of the distance between them, and Caliban was jerked from the floor by a pair of closing hands, and held as by a vise despite his frantic squirming!

The match went out, but a lamp soon made a better light, and in it Caliban was forced across the table, and saw the scorpion in Don Caddo's hand and very near his face.

Up to this moment not a word had been spoken by the pair.

"Does one bite rob your reptile of all its power?" laughed Don Caddo.

There was no reply beyond the look which seemed to tax the powers of the one eye to its utmost.

"Open your mouth!" cried the yellow cat from Carquinez. "I'm going to press the scorpion against your throat and hold it there unless you tell me who sent you hither and why you were sent."

Caliban read determination in the stern face that bent over him, and when he saw the hand descending, bringing downward the wriggling tail of his own scorpion, he uttered a cry of terror and tried to recoil.

In another instant the scorpion was forced into his mouth, and then while one hand held him down, another fell upon his face and kept him from rejecting the terrible thing!

Don Caddo with his waxed mustache, yellow face and gloating eyes easily became a demon fresh from Tartarus to the horror-stricken Caliban.

He felt the sting of the reptile in his tongue; a thousand arrows of pain seemed to dart into every part of his body; his whole head was on fire.

The grip of Don Caddo did not relax. His hand lay like a ton of iron over Caliban's mouth.

As the writhings of the dwarf grew feebler, the man from Carquinez looked more satisfied.

At length he fell back.

"The demon inventor has eaten his last triumph!" he laughed, looking at Caliban, who lay across the rough table unconscious if not dead.

He continued to study the scene before him a few seconds, when he suddenly left the house and was gone some minutes.

When he came back he found Caliban in the same place and motionless.

There was a stare of horror in the one eye that seemed to look at him from the table.

Don Caddo stooped and placed his hand over Caliban's heart.

"The poison had an easy way to his heart," said he to himself, and then he held the body above the table and shook it until the scorpion fell out and quivered under the lamp.

Caliban the armorer of the mountain camp was dead!

Don Caddo picked up the deadly scorpion and rolling it in a piece of buckskin put the whole in his pocket. Having done this he lifted the body of Caliban in his arms and carried it away.

Beyond the door he looked around with caution and then bolted across the street reaching the shadows of the houses on the other side.

What was he going to do?

It did not take the Carquinez Cat long to reach the steps of the Red Cardinal's abode.

He placed his burden down and put the scorpion back into the mouth of the dead.

He did these things with the coolness of a man of desperate nerve.

Five minutes afterward the body of Caliban was leaning against his master's door.

Don Caddo raised his hand and knocked loudly, then as he caught the sound of a heavy step, which he seemed to recognize, he drew back and calmly folded his hands.

In a moment the door was opened from the inside and as the man from Carquinez caught a

glimpse of Rutherford's form the dwarfish body fell inward and dropped at the Red Cardinal's feet!

"I fetched him home, Captain Thor. He couldn't come himself!" said the voice of the Cat. "Open his mouth and find there the fatal triumph of his genius. And when you want to cross hands and knives with Don Caddo seek him yourself. Don't arm a fool with a weapon that kills its owner!"

These words seemed to hold the big man spell-bound in the doorway. He forgot that he was standing over the corpse of Caliban for he leaned forward with a hand at the butt of a revolver and eyes fixed on the lithe figure in the street.

"Look to your dead!" continued the voice he had just heard. "Captain Cobra will get even with the living. What says the prophetic handwriting in Madam Marcia's bonanza? 'The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind the entire grist!' They're grinding now, Captain Thor, ha, ha!"

And Don Caddo vanished.

CHAPTER XXX.

CUPID SHOWS HIS TEETH.

LEFT with the dead body of the dwarf armorer of the camp, the Red Cardinal stooped and lifted it from the floor.

Carrying it below stairs, he laid it upon a cot in the work-shop.

During the journey the fatal scorpion dropped from the mouth of Caliban, and Rutherford ran across it when he came back.

He picked the strange reptile up and bore it to his own quarters, where he studied it some moments in silence.

"The Cat was too much for my tiger!" he exclaimed, grating his teeth at thought of Don Caddo. "Caliban was too sure of his work, but I had misgivings. The Cat from Carquinez has twice nine lives. His claws are as sharp as ever. Caliban felt them to his destruction. I must finish Don Caddo or feel the same claws beneath my skin."

Meantime the lithe figure in whose arms Caliban had come back to his master had returned to the scene of the battle with the scorpion.

But Don Caddo did not remain there.

In a short time he quitted the shanty and went to what was called the Cat's Kitten, a small mine from which, by dint of work, he had secured enough dust to let him indulge in occasional bouts with the "tiger" at the Cold Deck.

The Kitten was supposed to be a mine with few chambers and corridors, though it was quite well supplied in this direction, and soon after entering Don Caddo raised the lid of a chest in a certain corner and armed himself with a knife in lieu of the one which had been snapped by the Red Cardinal's breastplate.

Having done this he came back to his cabin and waited for Captain Thor's move.

All at once he recalled the horseman he had seen on the elevated trail before sundown.

Was it Captain Cobra?

He believed he had distinguished the dark head of the man of mystery, that he had recognized his stately pose in the saddle, but he had vanished too soon to let him have a satisfactory inspection.

"Dolores will find nothing," suddenly exclaimed Don Caddo, his thoughts flitting from Captain Cobra to the angel of Santa Leo. "As I told Shott, she should have looked for the trail here. She may come back soon. What did Captain Sam say when I told him that the real prize of the game was Dolores? He refused as her guardian to choose between me and Rutherford—calling us cat and tiger. By Jove! maybe he wants the girl himself! If I thought so—if I suspected that such was the meaning of his answer—I'd put him on the black list for it, by my life! I have but one thing in view—the winning of Dolores of Santa Leo!"

Don Caddo's eyes seemed to get a new flash as he spoke and the silken fingers which had lately stuffed the scorpion down Caliban's throat went toward his knife within a sudden leap, but it fell away without touching the hilt and the fierce light faded slowly away.

The man from Carquinez waited in vain for the Red Cardinal.

He did not know that bronzed hands had made a grave beneath the floor of the little workshop and that the master had buried his slave without so much as a sigh for his loss.

Rutherford had no intention of making a martyr out of Caliban.

The man whose genius had provided him with a vest of steel was entitled to a decent burial, but beyond that the Red Cardinal dared not go.

The Tribunal from whose clutches Captain Cobra had escaped could try Don Caddo for murder; but the secret of the scorpion would thus come out and Rutherford would appear as a man who had sent a dwarf to perform a crime from which a giant had shrunk.

Don Caddo thought of these things while he waited and watched amid the darkness by which he was surrounded in his own cabin.

As the minutes resolved themselves into hours without bringing a mob of Silver Serpents to his door, nor sending to his ears the tread of the

Red Cardinal, he rightly interpreted the strange silence.

Captain Thor was nursing his revenge.

The first half of the night was passing away when the man from Carquinez opened the door.

He saw the still open portals of the Cold Deck and the men beyond. But he saw more.

A figure flitted across the narrow street to his left and disappeared toward Dolores's home.

"She has come back!" broke over Don Caddo's lips. "She either did not find the trail of vengeance, or she has resolved to look for it here. I must see the girl. I must tell her something before either Sam Shott or the Red Cardinal can come between. The game is closing. The last cards are in the hands of the players. I know it."

He shut his door and went down the street, crossing it a short distance from his cabin and drawing close to the house built for Madam Marcia and her child.

As he came alongside he saw the flame of a match beyond the window and then the form of Dolores appeared to him in its light.

Don Caddo leaned forward and watched the girl while she lit a lamp. Her face was flushed and excited. She had not come back with the calmest of nerves.

All at once Don Caddo went to the door which was not latched, and the next moment the noise of his coming made Dolores turn, and the two stood face to face.

"Who found you?" cried the Angel of Santa Leo, falling back from the Carquinez Cat.

"Major Midget says he did not."

"Ah! you saw the runaway, then?"

"I met him in the mountains."

"Well, Dolores, I found myself," grinned Don Caddo. "I came back from the regions of the Styx without any help. I am here with my claws resharpened, and with eight lives of the mine in good repair."

Dolores eyed him a moment without reply.

"What did you find among the hills, girl?" queried Don Caddo.

"More than you think," was the response.

"The trail, eh?"

"Whose trail?"

"Why, that of the person who killed Madam Marcia. You went away to find it."

"So I did," said Dolores, half reflectively.

"Do you think I would be back thus soon if I had discovered no clew?"

"Not if you were really on vengeance bent."

"Do you doubt my motive, Don Caddo?"

"No!" exclaimed the man from Carquinez.

He went toward the beautiful creature as he answered. He tried to fathom the results of her mission through her deep dark eyes full of animation and secretive cunning.

"You need not tell me, Dolores," he suddenly said. "Keep your secrets."

"I have none," replied the girl. "I found the trail in the mountains."

"The right one? Make no mistake."

"Not for the world would I do so."

Then the silence that fell between the two was broken by Dolores again.

"I have seen Captain Cobra," said she.

Don Caddo started.

"Do you mean that you encountered the man with the iron knife among the hills?"

"I mean nothing else."

"Did he give you the clew?"

Dolores smiled at Don Caddo's eagerness.

"Captain Cobra is to me more of a puzzle than ever," she rejoined. "He is a human enigma, growing deeper every day."

"The Red Cardinal thinks so, especially since the iron blade came to Jose and left him dead with the disobeyed warning in his hand. So Captain Cobra gave you the pointer which has fetched you back?"

"He did."

"When do you strike?"

"When he issues the command."

Don Caddo colored with surprise.

"What! have you leagued yourself with the mystery of California? Have you made your cause his and—"

"Not that!" interrupted Dolores, her hand falling upon Don Caddo's arm, while she looked him in the eye. "My cause is mine—mine alone."

"But you have just said that you were not to strike until Captain Cobra gives the signal."

"I repeat that declaration."

"I am mystified!" cried Don Caddo. "Since you have seen and talked with Captain Cobra, tell me who he is."

"I don't know."

"Then the hood was not lifted?"

"It was not. The face behind it is as unknown to me now as it was a year ago."

"When does he come back to Santa Leo?"

"He may be here now."

"I don't doubt it," said Don Caddo once more recalling the horseman on the mountain. "Does Major Midget intend to hide till the game is ended?"

"The major has come back."

Once more Don Caddo started.

"Major Midget is now in camp," continued Dolores. "He knows that his flash shot at the Cold Deck merely marked the Red Cardinal. He did not intend to send a bullet through his

head which you know would have been no task for him at five paces."

"Major Midget is a dead-shot at fifty paces," exclaimed Don Caddo, and then he fell almost back to the door and looked at Dolores several minutes without resuming.

"One word about other matters," he suddenly said. "The time—the crisis—has arrived for that. I have spoken to Captain Sam in whose hands Madam Marcia left you with the last letter she ever penned. It was an odd interview, Dolores, one of surprises and some mystification. I did not conceal the truth; I told him that the real prize of the battle—outside of Captain Cobra's doings—is Dolores of Santa Leo. Captain Thor would enrich his Serpents with the spoil of Sam Shott's mine bonanzas. He has played for like game before this and won, for, whether it be to you a secret or not, he is the same schemer who won the Midas thousands in Shasta Land. But while he intends ere long to brush Captain Shott from his path and create a dozen bonanza kings you are the object of his scheming—you, Dolores!"

The girl with compressed lips said nothing. "I made this plain enough to Captain Sam, and when I asked him to choose, as your guardian, between Rutherford and Don Caddo he laughed in derision."

"What did he say?" quietly asked the Angel of Santa Leo.

"He said it would be choosing between cat and tiger," grated the Man from Carquinez.

"And wouldn't it?"

In an instant the face before Dolores flushed to the temples and then as suddenly grew white.

"(Gods! do you taunt me?" cried Don Caddo, bending suddenly forward, and a downward glance showed his clinched hands to the girl. "You forget the claw the cat carries under the velvet. Beware, Dolores! I have recorded in heaven—I, Don Caddo of Carquinez!—an oath that you shall become my bride, or—"

She sprung forward and caught his arm.

"Or what?" she cried, sternly.

"Or perish by a blade as keen as Captain Cobra's!"

Dolores drew back and covered him with her finger.

"The door is behind you, Cat of Carquinez!" said she.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DEMAND IN THE DARK.

"A FOOL and his tongue!" bitterly laughed the man who walked from the presence of Dolores a few seconds after the defiance that had fallen from her lips. "When I can bridle one I won't be the other. Now she knows for what I have been playing. I have exposed Don Caddo's hand."

The Carquinez Cat was at war with himself.

"By Jove! I wish Captain Cobra would come!" he continued, halting in his tracks. "He might as well round up now as later on. The fruit is ripe. Where are you, captain?"

No reply came back from the darkened space into which he looked though Don Caddo would not have shown much surprise if he had heard the voice and seen the hooded figure of the Mystery of the hills.

"It is yet, as it has been all along, the iron blade against the Red Cardinal and his Serpents! What holds you back, Captain Cobra? Are they to fall man by man—now one now another—until the whole band has been wiped out? What started you upon this merciless vengeance hunt with a hidden face and an iron knife? I can follow you from the heart of Shasta Land where Colonel Midas ruled until Captain Thor and his gang got all his wealth. I can trace your course from there into the Southwestern country where one after another of Count Cactus's men met their doom by a knife of iron precisely like the one you wield to-day. And you have called Rutherford of Santa Leo Count Cactus—halting before the packed court, and then walking off unharmed yourself. By George! it isn't a stone wall I'm looking at just now, Captain Cobra. The mystery begins to show spots of light though they are faint and vague. I'd like to see your face with the hood off. If you come back to Santa Leo the chances are that you will stand revealed before you quit it if you ever quit it alive."

Don Caddo seemed to have forgotten his exciting interview with Dolores while he communed with himself.

He had reached his shanty, and once more stood beneath the roof which his courage and defiance had kept so long.

He soon became conscious of the fact that he was not entirely alone.

Some lady was near at hand, even in the same room that held him.

Drawing his knife, Don Caddo leaned forward and drew a match over the rough underside of the table.

The little spark leaped into a bluish flame, and then as it changed to a yellow, he saw his visitor.

Captain Cobra was there, with the table between them, and the match revealing the bright eyes beyond the hood.

Don Caddo stared at the statuesque figure, whose arms were folded upon the ample chest.

Even before striking the match he would have bet against odds that Captain Cobra was the man he was about to discover.

"Is it peace or war?" asked the man from Carquinez.

"It is just what you make it," came through the mask.

"Then it sha'n't be war," answered Don Caddo, at the same time leaning toward the lamp, toward whose wick he dropped his match.

"No," said the voice of Captain Cobra; "we can talk in the dark."

Don Caddo threw his match to the floor.

"You've come back for the last time, eh, captain?" said the Cat.

"Do you think so, Don Caddo?"

"I do."

A moment's silence followed.

"You are right. I have come to finish the game."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

"You are not alone when you have the iron blade."

A low laugh seemed to sound behind the hood. At least Don Caddo thought he heard one.

"They are on the alert," resumed the man from Carquinez.

"They were before."

"But Jose has died since the last session of the Tribunal."

"Did they swear an oath of vengeance over Jose?"

"Not a public one."

"Do they think that Captain Cobra has the whole gang marked?"

"They talk that way now."

"What does the Red Cardinal say?"

"He keeps his opinions to himself. He always did, you know."

"Yes, even when he was not the Cardinal of Santa Leo. Caliban—"

"Caliban is dead!" interrupted Don Caddo.

"Dead?" echoed Captain Cobra.

"He tried to eat one of his scorpions. It was too much for him."

There was a sly chuckle in Don Caddo's last sentence.

Captain Cobra appeared to understand it, for he said:

"A man doesn't dine on scorpions without being helped to the dish."

"I should say not," laughed the Cat again.

"More, Don Caddo, do you ever open the doors of the past?" was the sudden question that came across the table in the dark.

"Of whose past?"

"Your own."

If Captain Cobra could have seen the man before him he would have beheld him fall back from the table with a change of color.

"Go on," said Don Caddo, hoarsely.

"I go back some years," continued the man of mystery. "You were once a freelance in Shasta Land."

"[?]"

"You! Please don't interrupt me. You were at that time interested in the affairs of one Colonel Midas, a nabob who seemed to transform into gold everything he touched."

"I knew him."

"In order to sharpen your memory, Don Caddo, I will say that you knew him intimately. In the course of events, which became very exciting where Colonel Midas lived, you were drawn into a conspiracy. There! don't start. I see you with better eyes than you think I possess. Colonel Midas disappeared. He went into his best mine and months afterward came out a mummy."

If Captain Cobra expected to have his last statement confirmed, he was disappointed. Don Caddo said nothing.

"Colonel Midas or the corpse supposed to be his was buried, and the conspirators fought awhile over his wealth and then parceled it among themselves. You got nothing for your share, Don Caddo."

"Right you are. They gave me nothing."

"We are mistaken," and Captain Cobra laughed. "They sent you over a canyon wall, but the devil who is said to take good care of his own sent a hand to the rescue, and instead of tumbling headlong down a thousand-foot wall, you were pulled up to be Don Caddo in Santa Leo. I have now skimmed over the past. You acknowledge that I have falsified nothing."

"It is, in the main, correct," said Don Caddo.

"At one time you seemed to be in Colonel Midas's confidence."

"I never got very deep into it," laughed the man from Carquinez.

"But deep enough to steal, eh?"

Whether it was the question or the tone in which it was spoken, Don Caddo almost tumbled from his backless chair. His hand sought and found the knife he had drawn before lighting his match.

"I thought it was to be peace between us, Captain Cobra," cried he.

"It is just what you make it," repeated the Hooded Mystery. "I have said that you got

deep enough into Colonel Midas's confidence to steal a little. Don Caddo, I want what you took!"

The demand in the dark was couched in tones not to be misunderstood or disobeyed.

"I want the bit of property which Colonel Midas lost at the hands of the dandified thief who one night invaded his private room and took that which ninety-nine men would have spurned. Come, Don Caddo; as you have said, I am not alone. I have the inseparable companion of my wanderings with me."

"The infernal blade of iron?"

"Yes! It has never missed, and you know something of its work, for you have seen it among the mountains and under the cacti of the plains."

At the same moment a hand, darting across the table, found Don Caddo's wrist and closed on it, the fingers feeling cold as they seemed to sink into the flesh, like the coils of a serpent.

Still retaining his hold Captain Cobra came around the table and Don Caddo rising to his feet felt himself held with a steadiness which told him how cool was the mystery of the mask.

"It is here. You have kept it all these years," continued Captain Cobra. "Don't tell me that you threw it away—that, tired of keeping it, you dropped it into some canyon torrent or watched it shrivel in a secret fire. I know better. Even now you are holding it for a purpose—for one of your last trumps should all the others fail. Don Caddo, Captain Cobra, the hooded hunter of the hills demands of you for the last time the treasure you took from Colonel Midas in Shasta Land."

"You are Colonel Midas!" exclaimed the man from Carquinez; but he was immediately answered with a deep, derisive laugh.

"Fool!" cried Captain Cobra. "Colonel Midas came back from his bonanza a hideous mummy strangely preserved by the air of the mine. You can't by any latter-day miracle bring the dead to life. Don't waste precious moments in speculation. I want the thing you stole."

Don Caddo drew back followed by Captain Cobra who still clutched his wrist. He led the man of mystery across the room, felt awhile in the dark, found and opened a secret place in the wall, took out something and placed it in his visitor's hand.

"I thought so!" said Captain Cobra, his fingers closing on the pocket whose outer covering was soft though well-worn buckskin. "I don't forget the occurrences of the past, Don Caddo. Do you still think me Colonel Midas, the mummied nabob of Shasta Land?"

"No! You can't be; but you are his avenger."

The cold hand unclasped itself at Don Caddo's wrist, the figure of the Mystery fell back, and the cabin door opened and closed to a "Good-night" that met a responsive echo in the lithe man's bosom.

"Satan in a hood!" exclaimed the man from Carquinez. "What does he want with the portrait of Madam Marcia, the dead?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE DEATH-BOX.

THERE was a slight start on the Red Cardinal's part when he knew that Dolores, the avenger, had come back.

"Where is the girl?" he eagerly asked the messenger.

"At her house."

Rutherford glanced toward the mirror and saw reflected there his bandaged face, the result of his encounter with Major Midget.

The Serpent who had fetched the news seemed to catch his thoughts.

"Another person has returned," said he.

"Major Midget?"

"Major Midget."

At this reply the Cardinal's eyes got a quick flash.

"The fly could not keep away from the web, eh?" he exclaimed.

"He has come back, anyhow."

"But he does not show himself?"

"He is not at his old table."

"I should think not; the toys wouldn't stand that."

"What orders, captain?"

"I have none."

The Silver Serpent looked surprised.

What! Major Midget back in Santa Leo and no orders from the Red Cardinal? It was amazing.

"No, I have no orders," repeated Rutherford to himself, when he was once more alone. "I prefer to carry out my own vengeance. If the dwarf disturber thinks he can brave it out in this den of lions, I shall undeceive him. Whenever I think of him I feel his accursed bullet tearing through my cheek. I intend to give the boys something to talk about. The Cat from Carquinez and the rat from Nowhere shall feel the ungloved hand of Count Cactus."

Five minutes later the Red Cardinal stood beyond the precincts of his house.

His giant figure looked larger than ever in the dim light of the stars, and he towered above the street like a king of men.

Passing between the cabins, the Red Cardinal drew near to Major Midget's cabin and listened.

He wondered if the little man was beyond the door—if he had the coolness to sleep again in Santa Leo after his exploit at the Cold Deck.

It was dark inside, but suddenly, to Rutherford's complete surprise, a light was struck, and he saw the little figure of the major bending over the floor in one corner.

The Red Cardinal looked on with eager interest.

He was within a few feet of his foe, and a bound on his part would force the door and place the major at his mercy.

It was like the tiger watching his unsuspecting prey.

Major Midget, totally unconscious of the danger outside, took up a board and removed from a receptacle of some kind beneath a bundle of papers, which he ran over in the light, his eyes following eagerly his nimble fingers.

At length he selected a document from the rest, restored the others to the strange safe, and took a seat at the table.

The Red Cardinal had not let a movement escape his eye.

Major Midget took pen and ink from a drawer in the table, and in another minute was writing deliberately at the foot of the document.

If Captain Thor could have looked down over the man's shoulder, he would have read something like this:

"Codicil to the above will made by Major Midget of Santa Leo:

"I hereby revoke that portion of the above document which gives my mine to Dolores, and I now convey it to Captain Sam in trust for her. I also bequeath to Captain Cobra, the Man of Mystery, if he wants it, the package of papers to be found beneath the floor of my shanty in the southwest corner. This codicil is made in good health and spirits, but with due regard to the uncertainty of human life in Santa Leo.

"Signed, MAJOR MIDGET."

The little man folded the paper, and placed it in his bosom, after which he buttoned his coat tightly in front and got up.

A minute afterward he extinguished the light, and the Red Cardinal was in doubt as to his movements, until the door opened and his dwarfish figure appeared.

Major Midget stood within his rival's reach. Rutherford could have caught him by putting forth his hand, but he refrained.

It was by the merest accident that the giant was not seen, but the major was not looking for spies at that time, and in a few seconds he walked away, followed though at a respectful distance by the Red Cardinal.

An hour later Rutherford reappeared in his own house.

He turned on the light, and threw himself into a chair with an expression of delight.

His play whatever it had been had resulted in success, for drawing a folded paper from an inner pocket he bent forward with glowing eyes to read it.

It proved to be the last will and testament of Major Midget, and Rutherford smiled several times while he devoured its contents.

Where had he obtained it? and how?

Had a life been lost in the capture of the document?

"Gods! I know him now!" exclaimed the chief of the Silver Serpents. "This will throws new light on the mystery. It reveals much of the truth. I see more than I ever saw before. A thousand thanks, Major Midget."

Captain Thor put the will away and jerked a small cord which hung along the wall near by.

In less than three minutes the door opened and shut and a man almost his equal in physique stood before him.

"What is the news, Merle?" eagerly questioned Rutherford.

"We have but little," was the reply.

"Has no one come back?"

"Yes; Dolores is here."

"Ah!" exclaimed the Red Cardinal affecting astonishment. "Back, is she? Who came with her?"

"She came alone."

"Merle, you will take the box—the sealed box, you know—"

"Yes, captain."

"You will wind it up—setting it for three hours."

Merle the Serpent bowed.

"Having done this, you will place it against the back logs of Shanty 26."

The man looked astonished into the the Red Cardinal's face.

"Make no mistake," continued Rutherford. "You know how the box works, for I explained the whole thing one day just as I got it from Caliban."

"Where is Caliban?"

"He is busy and cannot operate the box," was the response.

Cabin 26 was Major Midget's home, and want of information concerning his whereabouts was the cause of Merle's start.

Captain Thor left the room and soon returned with a small square box under his arm.

It was not large nor dangerous-looking, but

the uses to which it was about to be put suggested that it was by no means harmless.

Placing it on the table the Silver Serpent looked at his companion, and touched the box lightly with one finger.

"Set it for three hours; you see the notch here," said he. "Caliban was a wonderful genius—"

"Was, did you say, Captain Thor?"

"Yes, Merle, Caliban has retired from the realms of invention. Now, don't ply me with questions. Take the box and place it according to my orders. Set it against the logs of Cabin 26."

The big Serpent stepped forward and picked up the box.

If Major Midget had not returned, why destroy the cabin with the infernal box? This thought came into Merle's head without an effort.

As he turned to depart he saw a smile lurking at the corners of the Red Cardinal's mouth.

Merle went down the unlighted street toward Major Midget's shanty.

In a little time he had placed the box as commanded, and then with the same noiseless tread went back and braced his nerves at the bar of the Cold Deck.

It was something for a man to carry under his arm, an infernal box, which at the end of a given time was expected to explode, scattering death and destruction throughout the immediate vicinity. A little nerve-bracing after such a task was not only needful but necessary.

The night wore on.

The Red Cardinal, wide awake, counted the steps of time by his watch, and Merle, who could not get the box out of his head, visited the bar several times and drank to the lucky obediency of orders.

"Twenty minutes more, my bird, and then you quit the stage!" laughed Captain Thor, glancing for the hundredth time at his watch.

"The man who could make bullet-proof vests and deadly scorpions was not likely to fail with an infernal machine. Let me see, major. You were right when you said that it was Count Cactus who sent you into the border camp at the end of a lasso. We are sometimes a long while getting even. In fifteen minutes, my little wasp, we'll be square."

Captain Thor betook his stalwart figure to the door and listened. The whole camp was still save now and then when the sound of the heavy glasses came from the Cold Deck's open door.

Dolores at home again and the box of death at Major Midget's cabin almost ready to do its awful work.

The double thought thrilled the Red Cardinal with ecstasy.

He went back and bent over the watch he had left on the table.

The time was up, had passed by two minutes.

"I may be a minute or so wrong," said Rutherford, "but in a case of this kind, five or even ten make no difference."

Then he sat down to wait.

The time he had mentioned soon rolled around.

"In Satan's name what has happened? Has Caliban's death-box failed me?"

He sprung up and started across the room with angry eyes and a curse on his tongue.

He had not reached the door when it opened in his face, and an object fell inside.

In an instant the Red Cardinal fell back, staring at the thing on the floor, for he had already seen that the box itself had come home.

With a startling cry he rushed forward and picked it up, and holding it toward the light read on one of its sides in red chalk, this sentence:

"I come home, Captain Thor, with the compliments of Major Midget."

The next moment, with a harder oath than ever, Rutherford flung the box across the room.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BACK TO THE OLD LIFE.

BAFFLED in his diabolical attempt to destroy the little sport of Santa Leo, and bitterly cursing that failure, the Red Cardinal could almost see the handwriting on the wall.

He did not doubt that the infernal machine had been brought home by Major Midget in person, though he had not caught sight of the person who had brought it.

A little cooler after the lapse of a few moments, he carried the box back to Caliban's workshop, where he left it with a final oath.

Once more he jerked the cord which had summoned Merle into his presence, but this time ten minutes passed before the big man came.

"What did you do?" cried Rutherford.

"I carried out your orders to the letter."

"You placed the box against the logs of Cabin 26?"

"I did."

"Set for three hours?"

"Yes."

"But there have been no results."

Merle did not answer.

"What do you think?" queried the Red Cardinal.

"I have no opinion, Captain Thor."

"Ha! Just when you should have one you plead poverty," cried Rutherford. "The truth is that I had just received the box back."

Astonishment at once lit up Merle's dark eyes.

"Who delivered it?" he asked.

"Who, but the occupant of Shanty 26?"

"I did not know he had returned."

The Red Cardinal smiled.

"Do you think I'd want to blow up an empty but?" he laughed. "By Jove! it was the little scoundrel himself whom I was anxious to elevate to the stars."

"I see," said Merle. "The audacity of Major Midget is gilt-edged."

"I should say it was. But I will write an order."

Rutherford moved closer to the table and spread writing materials before him. While he worked he was closely watched by Merle who seemed to study him with a suddenly-assumed curiosity.

"What is it?" asked the Red Cardinal, who caught his man so suddenly at his inspection that he blushed. "Have I changed so of late that I don't look like my old self?"

"No, it's just the other way," was the response. "You look like the old captain once more."

"Like Cool Claude, the Bonanza Bull of Shasta Land?"

"No, like Count Cactus."

A laugh rippled through the long hair of the red mustache.

"Those were grand days, Merle!" exclaimed Rutherford. "We weren't cooped up in a mountain camp then. We had the sky for a roof and the wild plain was our forage-ground."

"You are right. We made money those days."

"Why not go back to them?"

A flash of joy seemed to fill the eyes that regarded the Red Cardinal. It was a longing for the life he had called up.

"I'm willing!" exclaimed Merle. "This life is irksome. One must spend his wealth within narrow limits here. He can't throw himself into a saddle and swoop down upon a rich ranch like an eagle. This is a dog's life. Here we live in the shadow of the accursed blade of a madman. I'm no coward, Captain Thor—you've seen me tried a thousand times—but I want to go back to the old life. There is some rich booty on the border."

Rutherford heard Merle through without interrupting him. He held his pen poised above the paper and listened with a smile on his face.

All at once he snatched the paper from the table and tore it into a thousand fragments.

"I'm tired of this life with you, Merle!" he cried.

"By Jove! I'm glad of it. I'd give the winnings of the rest of my life to see Count Cactus in the saddle once more."

"They want me down there," said Rutherford, smiling again.

"Pish! what do they amount to? A Greaser never caught an eagle."

"But Uncle Sam's troops might hunt us."

"As they've done before!" laughed Merle.

"With the old band at your back, Captain Thor, you need not fear the marshaled hosts of Hades."

"By Jupiter, I believe you. How many would go?"

"All!" came the quick response. "We've canvassed the scheme among ourselves. We are tired of this humdrum existence here."

The Red Cardinal pushed back his chair and stood erect before the man who had just spoken.

"We will go!" he said with deliberation.

"Back to the border?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Now."

Merle sprung with an exulting shout toward the door.

"Not too fast," admonished Rutherford. "A good deal has to be done before we can set out. Come back here at the end of an hour."

"I will be here."

In another moment the chief of the Silver Serpents was alone.

"We can make our mark and fortunes on the old stamping-ground," said he to himself. "I have wanted to become Count Cactus again. Captain Cobra will follow, but there we can meet him on better terms. We can turn hunters. We can make life a burden to the man with the iron blade, and as to Don Caddo and Major Midget, I'll depart in such a manner that will force them to follow. The vultures of the Southwest border will pick their bones in the shadow of the cacti."

Captain Thor slipped from the house and glided in the rear of a string of cabins to one of his mines.

"I did not expect to do this so soon," said he, as he entered a chamber in the interior, and descended into another by means of a rope ladder, that shook with his weight, along a dark wall. "Thanks to the fertile mind of Caliban, we can leave our compliments behind. The mine is as dry as powder, and everything is in working order."

Captain Thor had struck a match, with which he was examining a fuse which projected half an inch from a lead pipe imbedded in the wall before him.

Half an hour later he went up the ladder, and slipped from the mine.

"What! back already?" he exclaimed, finding Merle in possession of his house.

"I've mustered the Serpents," answered the man, in high glee.

"Are they willing?"

"They are eager!"

"All?"

"All."

"To-night the Red Cardinal resumes the spurs of Count Cactus!" exclaimed Rutherford.

"But the iron blade will follow us, Merle."

A contemptuous sneer curled the well-cut lips of the stalwart Serpent.

"There are lassos on the border!" he said. "Foxes who wait for the hare behind the cacti, don't always wait in vain. The supper comes."

"Ha, ha! So it does, Merle!"

It was past midnight—in fact, the star-dials were marking the first hour of morning—when a form, giant-like but noiseless, stopped at Dolores's door and listened.

No sound came from the little house, and the figure stood there fully ten minutes, without a movement of any sort.

Beneath the eyes grew a heavy beard, a part of which was concealed by a dark shirt. There was no other beard like it in Santa Leo, for there was but one Red Cardinal there.

After some minutes of intense listening at the girl's door, one of the big hands tried the latch.

It yielded with the slightest click imaginable, and the next moment the door was pushed open.

Captain Thor slipped into the room and stood still.

In an instant he heard a quick exclamation, and the Angel of Santa Leo rose before him, her white face revealed by the dim night-lamp on the simple table.

"In Heaven's name what means this intrusion?" cried Dolores.

The Red Cardinal took a step forward.

"The time has come," said he, looking sternly into the girl's face.

"What time?" asked Dolores.

"The time that marks the beginning of the end. The game has entered upon its last quarter. Santa Leo is doomed. Captain Cobra, the hooded madman, must ride to other trails, if he would continue his murderous calling. You have come back from the mountains. What did you find among them, Dolores? I believe you went to seek a clue to the death of Madam Marcia. I told you ere you went that the quest would be an empty one, but you would not listen; you even laughed at me, and threatened Caliban with death, if he followed. Now, girl, you will seek a new home."

"With whom?"

"With me."

Instantly Dolores drew back, but the swoop of the dark hand of Captain Thor was too quick for her.

She felt the long fingers coil about her wrist with the cold evolutions of a snake, and the next second she was looking into the face of the man she despised.

"You dare not take me!" she said, with a firmness that surprised him. "I own no master beneath the skies. I am the daughter of Madam Marcia, and my life work is the avenging of her death."

"You can't complete it here," cried Rutherford.

"I can if you dare to remain," was the quick reply. "I have found the trail. I did not go to the mountains for nothing. They yielded up more than you think."

He broke into a laugh, which seemed to loosen his grip, for all at once Dolores freed herself, and before he could re-seize the wrist he had lost, she stood erect against the wall, her face like marble, but her eyes on fire, and a suddenly-acquired knife in her hand.

"Come! You won't use the dagger on Captain Thor, girl!" he exclaimed, moving forward.

"No! I cannot strike until he gives the signal," was the reply, and to the Red Cardinal's amazement, Dolores threw the blade away.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE IRON BLADE.

WHILE these scenes were transpiring at the house of Dolores, the Silver Serpents were making preparations for the exodus.

All were as anxious as Merle to get back to the old life which, while it would be attended with danger, was freer than the one they had been leading. The Red Cardinal and his gang had come up from the border and settled Santa Leo.

The chief had left behind the name and title of Count Cactus, just as, some years before, he had doffed another name to assume the one which had been a terror among the ranches of the Southwest.

Perhaps the desperadoes thought that the iron knife would not follow them back to the old

stamping-ground, that Captain Cobra would withdraw from the hunt, leaving them to be harassed by the military of the border, but they did not know the masked mystery of the hills.

While they worked throughout the camp, packing up the few traps they possessed, or settling old scores at the bar of the Cold Deck, the very man whom they expected to outwit stood near a certain house looking at a handsome person who was visible through the window.

Captain Cobra, after his interview in the dark with Don Caddo, had gone toward Sam Shott's house, and the bonanza-owner of Santa Leo was the man whom he was now regarding with such interest.

The keen eyes that glowed behind the hood watched Shott like a hawk. They saw him running over the last reports from his mines, and for thirty minutes the hooded chief did not stir from the position he had assumed by the window.

At last Bonanza Sam shut the ledger with an emphasis that startled Captain Cobra.

The man in the mask sprung to the door.

In another moment an eager hand had turned the knob, and he was inside.

"My God! You?" exclaimed Shott, with a start.

"Captain Cobra!" came from behind the mask, while the dark eyes twinkled. "We won't transact any conveyancing to-night, Captain Shott. I have no more mines to give away at present."

A smile lurked at the corners of the nabob's mouth. He had never thought that Captain Cobra really owned what he had given away.

"How many men have you?" continued the man of mystery.

"Miners, do you mean?"

"Men on whom you can depend."

"I employ one hundred and sixty miners. They are all for me."

"Through thick and thin?"

"Yes," said Shott, wondering at Captain Cobra's persistence.

The hooded chief took another step forward.

"That is good," he answered. "Santa Leo is about to lose some of its citizens. The exodus is preparing."

"What do you mean?"

"Count Cactus is going back to his old domain."

"No!"

"Even now his men are getting ready. Look here, Captain Shott. It is this that frightens them," and instantly an iron knife lay in Captain Cobra's hand the point toward the bonanza-owner. "You know that the Red Cardinal stopped before his leap at me in the Plaza at mention of the name of Count Cactus."

"Sultan told me," said Shott.

"The name fell like a thunderbolt upon one-half of the crowd, and the result was that I walked away as free as the eagle escaped from his cage. You have heard of Count Cactus?"

"The famous bandit of the Southwest border?"

"The same."

"His deeds are history everywhere."

"Red history, too!" exclaimed Captain Cobra.

"Well, the count is going back—that is, if we let him."

Sam Shott said nothing for looking at his visitor and waiting for him to proceed.

"You have one hundred and sixty men, you say," he went on. "Quite enough. Captain Thor will lead his followers past the mines and into the Devil's Gap. They came through it to Santa Leo; it leads to the old stamping-ground among the cacti and the flourishing ranches of the Mexican gentry. Captain Thor has prepared his last compliments for his enemies. The brain of Caliban the inventive demon has shaped those compliments into elements of destruction, and even now a fuse in the dark awaits the avenging match of the old lion of the plains."

Shott the bonanza nabob did not start forward with a horrified cry. Captain Cobra the mysterious was holding him spellbound.

"I see I interest you, Captain Sam," continued the hooded man. "A cunning fellow is this Captain Thor or Count Cactus, chief of the Silver Serpents. A fuse and a match—ba! ba! The two would work untold destruction, and all that's wanting is a hand, which is about to complete the trio."

"Where is he?" cried Sam Shott coming toward Captain Cobra, his hands clinched and his face flushed. "He must not ignite the fuse! I know what you mean. Caliban has produced some infernal explosive. A secret mine exists. Santa Leo sits over a piece of honeycombed earth. The Red Cardinal's principal bonanza is directly beneath us. That desperate devil will stoop to anything."

"As he has stooped a thousand times before to-night!" was the response. "From the heart of Shasta Land to the home of the Cacti is a long journey. Captain Thor has played his dual roles with the cunning of a fox and the coolness of a thug. He has destroyed certain papers which he does not want to take back to the border. His men—the Serpents—as I have said are ready. They are waiting for the signal. Ere that is given the Red Cardinal will

steal down to his king mine. He will touch a match to Caliban's fuse and then the whole gang will go away with the shadow of annihilation behind them."

"In Heaven's name, we must beat this play!" exclaimed Shott. "You forget who are menaced. Some of the best and bravest men in California are in my employ. I would perish myself rather than see them blotted out by the act of a fiend like the Red Cardinal."

"What about Don Caddo?" asked Captain Cobra.

"That Mexican Cat?" smiled Captain Sam. "He has played his several hands against the Cardinal ever since the two came together here. It has been diamond against diamond, but despite Rutherford's power and cunning Don Caddo has been a match for him. Still the Carquinez Cat is treacherous. A beautiful face and a pair of bright eyes have caught him, and he has made them the prize of the game he is in. Ha! you understand me, captain."

The young bonanza king had caught the sudden change in Captain Cobra's eyes.

"Don Caddo is all you say he is, and more," said he. "He, too, was in a certain game in Shasta Land wherein one Colonel Midas, of whom you may have heard, was beaten out of all he possessed, was transformed into a mummy, his mines fought for by a lot of tigers who finally rode south and terrorized the border under the leadership of Count Cactus. The hour and the man have come."

As Captain Cobra uttered his last words he stepped back, and his figure seemed to increase in stature.

"Send thirty of your best men to the road leading to the Devil's Pass," he continued, in tones of authority. "Arm all the rest quietly. Who is your trusted man?"

"Sultan."

"A man of nerve?"

"Cool and unflinching."

"We may not need a trigger," smiled Captain Cobra. "This is the decisive night in the history of more than one life. To-morrow Captain Cobra disappears from the death-drama he has played for years, or he opens another act which may be wilder than any he has yet played. To-morrow the sunlight sees the face it has not seen for years, or it never shines upon it again. Get your men ready, Captain Sam. Thirty at the road, the rest armed where you can throw them into the Square at a moment's notice. You know that outside of the Silver Serpents two hundred men stand ready to shoot for the Red Cardinal."

Captain Cobra laid his hand on the door.

"A man ought to fight for nine mines," said he, looking at Shott. "But there is more than wealth at stake. Captain Cobra can bestow upon you more than the bonanzas he has thrown into your lap. Don Caddo knows what is worth playing for if he is a treacherous, cunning Cat from the Carquinez woods. Stand firm, Captain Shott. The iron knife has been drawn for the last time. The hand that has fashioned deadly scorpions and steel breast-plates will never make the devil's playthings any more. Its owner missed the iron knife by a scratch. Now, marshal your men, and for once in your life obey orders from Captain Cobra, the Mysterious."

Sam Shott found himself alone almost before the last word had left the strange speaker's lips.

He heard the door shut and saw the hooded head of Captain Cobra vanish beyond the light outside.

But he did not see the masked Mystery dodge among the cabins and at last appear in front of Dolores's home from which after listening a moment at the door he slipped away toward the mines.

Into the shaft of one he disappeared, and passing from corridor to chamber at last, with the aid of a match, jerked a fuse from the mouth of a leaden tube.

Then he waited in the darkness as a cat waits for her prey.

CHAPTER XXXV.

FACE TO FACE ONCE MORE.

MEANWHILE the Silver Serpents continued their preparations for flight.

Captain Thor, last seen at Dolores's house had come away without the girl; but her words and actions had only strengthened the daring plan he had formed.

To go back to the border without Dolores was no victory at all.

He had played for the Angel of Santa Leo with the same eagerness with which he had plotted against Sam Shott and Don Caddo. Dolores was the real prize of the game as we have time after time heard the Cat from Carquinez affirm. The bearded Ajax of Santa Leo had been smitten by her beauty as he had never been smitten before. To win her would be to win a complete triumph over Don Caddo, but he knew that Dolores had not been captivated by the chief of the Silver Serpents, and that Don Caddo of the black eyes had found no favor in her eyes.

Yet to take her away—to carry her a prisoner

to the scene of his exploits as Count Cactus—would show the man from Carquinez that he held the better hand, that though he could escape from the underground Styx he could not in the end outwit the man who had consigned him to its flood.

Captain Thor left Dolores after the interview already recorded in a frame of mind difficult to describe.

The girl felt that a crisis was at hand, and knowing that Captain Cobra had come into camp and was somewhere concealed she was inclined to believe that the Red Cardinal expected to make a ten strike which would abolish forever all fears of the iron blade.

For several minutes after his departure Dolores stood looking at the knife she had thrown to the floor.

Did she know that Rutherford's heart was protected by Caliban's impenetrable armor which on a recent occasion had broken Don Caddo's dagger at the hilt?

She stepped over the shining blade and went to the door. As she opened it there passed with a quick step a man whom she knew.

It was Merle.

Even by the dim light that prevailed Dolores saw that the big boss miner was dressed for a journey. Everything indicated a jaunt in the saddle, and the mountain canteen swinging on his hip revealed much to the girl.

There was water among the mountains, but beyond the claim lay the waterless plains which stretched away toward the southern horizon until they became the cacti-dotted wastes of the border. Merle had barely disappeared when another Serpent similarly equipped passed before Dolores's vision.

The Angel of Santa Leo started.

"Does it mean an exodus?" she exclaimed. "Was the visit to me of Captain Thor that villain's last? Is Captain Cobra to be beaten at the wind-up of the game? His defeat means mine, strange as it seems. The flight of the Red Cardinal and his men will postpone indefinitely, if not forever, the day of vengeance."

Dolores crept from her house and ventured toward the Square.

She saw the lights of the Cold Deck, the scattered faro tables and not a dozen men at play.

Stealing closer in she looked in upon the players, studying all a few seconds.

There was not a Serpent among them.

"It means flight!" exclaimed Dolores turning back. "In God's name, where is Captain Cobra?"

She had left the limits of the Square when a sudden step caused her to turn.

The Red Cardinal!

The sight of the head of the Silver Serpent sent a nameless thrill through the girl's frame.

He, too, had changed his dress, and her quick eyes glancing downward, caught the momentary glitter of a spur.

"This is luck indeed!" said Captain Thor springing to Dolores's side before she could escape. "I was just going after you."

"After me?" echoed the girl with a stare.

"Yes."

"Well, I am here, Captain Thor."

By this time the hand of Rutherford was again at the maiden's wrist.

"No noise," said he stepping forward.

"This is no place for questions. I see a dozen in your eyes. Keep them back. The future will answer them all."

Dolores held back despite the gentle pull that followed his last words.

"I hold the trumps of the game!" he suddenly laughed. "Captain Thor never held a hand that lost. Don't face me like a statue, Dolores. I am not the Carquinez Cat nor Major Midget. I am as powerful where you find me as Captain Cobra is on the trail. Come! A shout means that you will remain behind unfit for the altar, with your vengeance hunt ended before it has begun."

In another moment Dolores was being hurried toward the limits of the camp.

She passed her own house, but was not permitted to stop.

It was on, on until where the shadows lay thickest under a clump of trees she was turned over to a number of dark figures.

"Where am I?" involuntarily asked Dolores.

"Among friends," answered a voice.

"We wouldn't harm one of your hairs," said another man on her right.

"But, I am a prisoner."

"Not quite that. You are going away with us—going to a better place than this."

"Ah! I understand!" cried the girl, falling back. "You have deserted Santa Leo."

There was no reply for a moment.

"We're going to spread our wings. We can't do it here," was the answer.

"And I am to accompany you?"

"Yes!"

Before the men could prevent Dolores had stepped back and was almost clear of the crowd.

She wished for the knife she had flung at the Cardinal's feet. She might have fought her way beyond the circle which suddenly closed in upon her, but in a moment she realized that she was

unarmed and at the mercy of Captain Thor's followers.

"You don't get away, child," laughed the spokesman who was Merle. "We wait here for the captain—"

"For Count Cactus?"

The men laughed in chorus.

"You use the name as if you're used to it," said Merle. "Yes, we're waiting for him."

Dolores did not reply, but stood silent in the midst of the men whom she recognized as her eyes became accustomed to the darkness.

At times her heart seemed to stand still in her breast. The red rough was going back to his old life. With the Silver Serpents at his back he was about to become an outlaw in some portion of the country—to establish somewhere a camp of desperadoes in which she would be expected to live, not alone and protected as in Santa Leo, but as the Cardinal's wife.

Five minutes passed.

Dolores was not permitted to follow Rutherford for after he delivered her over to his hand.

She did not know in which direction he had gone; but of course there was some new villainy afoot.

If she could have played shadow to the man with two lives she would have seen him run down a narrow path toward his best mine.

Satanic eagerness seemed to lend speed to his feet. He plunged into the mouth of the bonanza and felt his way rapidly along the walled corridor. A bit of air which came from some unknown quarter parted his long red beard, throwing one half over each shoulder.

At last he stopped amid utter darkness and laughed till some weird echoes came back from unseen walls.

"A game well played is a game well won!" ejaculated the Red Cardinal upon the heels of his laugh. "I will now leave my compliments with the spawn who remain behind. In a few days the vultures of the borders will welcome back Count Cactus and the mesquite bushes will once more shield the lasso-watchers of the desert trails. Ha, ha, Captain Cobra, follow the band if you dare. There the hunted will turn hunters and the rich ranches will fill the coffers of Count Cactus and his Serpents with untold wealth. My compliments, Captain Sam. I sharpen your claws with a death-bolt, Don Caddo; and as for you, Major Midget, this is better than Caliban's box!"

He waited until he had finished his exulting speech before he revealed his surroundings by the flash of a match.

With a leer of devilish triumph on his swarthy face, he leaned toward a wall and held the little light before him.

"Gods!" he suddenly cried. "What has become of the fuse? I left it here—here in the tube."

His bulging eyes told that he could not credit the startling evidence of sight. He held the match against the leaden tube, throwing the ruddy glare an inch or more beyond its rim.

All at once he happened to glance at the smooth wall above the tube. The empty hole had claimed all his attention until that moment.

"Some one has been here!" cried the Red Cardinal, and then as the match burned for half a second with a brighter light, he read on the wall a sentence he had seen before, but in another place:

"The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind the entire grist!"

Captain Thor, the double-face, seemed to fall back from the words on the stone as if they had been spoken by the lips of doom.

The following moment a slight noise struck his ear.

Throwing up the hand that held the match, he whirled with a start and then went back to the wall itself.

A figure followed with the swiftness of a cat's leap, and ere the Red Cardinal threw the match away, he saw the dark hood and the victorious eyes of Captain Cobra of the iron blade.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE LAST TRIBUNAL.

THERE in the darkness of the bonanza which the cunning of Caliban had seamed with death, stood the two enemies face to face—the known and the mysterious.

Not more than three feet intervened between them.

The boss of Santa Leo had retreated to the wall, and had it at his back, rendering escape in that direction impossible.

He thought he could make out the figure that confronted him, but of this he was by no means certain, though he knew that the hooded face was within reach if he chose to put forth his hand.

A thrill of secret joy entered Rutherford's heart when he thought of the steel breast-plate he wore. It had turned, yea, broken Don Caddo's blade. How should the iron knife of Captain Cobra prevail against it?

But the man who faced him in the dark did not give him much time for thought or self-congratulation.

"Have you no more matches, Captain Thor?" he suddenly asked.

"I do not have to light them if I have," was the tart rejoinder, so full of desperate defiance that the man of mystery must have guessed that a struggle to the death then and there was imminent.

"Come, I have matches," he said, and forthwith the flash of a lucifer brought out the tableau which had been enacted in the dark.

Captain Cobra thrust one end of the match into a narrow crack in the wall and the little stick burned with considerable power, throwing its light upon rocks and men.

"Let us go back," continued Captain Cobra.

The Red Cardinal did not move.

"Why not fight it out here?" he said. "We have come together at last. Neither has the advantage."

"The Tribunal is not in session if that is what you mean," was the reply. "But I will not fight here."

"At any rate show your face like a man."

"It will be seen soon enough."

The Red Cardinal laughed.

The match flickering at the wall was about to expire and leave them to darkness once more.

"A steel vest under your coat protects the heart that beats there," said Captain Cobra. "Caliban had a fertile brain, but his genius killed him in the end. Count Cactus, you will follow me back to the Plaza." And the hand that touched Rutherford's wrist closed there like the grip of death.

The chief of the Silver Serpents instantly called up all his strength, and for a moment his veins stood out like whipcords as he prepared to throw himself upon Captain Cobra, and with all his power hurl him back and terminate forever the life-hunt of the iron blade.

But another hand was quicker than his thoughts. In an instant he went against the wall with five closing merciless fingers under his chin, and the same number still at his wrist.

At this moment the match sent forth an expiring spurt of light and went out, and at the same time, under the clutch of the dreaded death hand of California, myriads of stars danced confusedly before the Cardinal's eyes.

"The long lane has turned at last!" he heard a voice say. "The mills of God find the last grist in the hopper and the hand of vengeance directs the burrs!"

Then the voice ceased and all was dark.

No one saw the man who bent over a human figure lying on the hard floor of a chamber, whose walls were of stone and whose ceiling the little light in his hand did not reveal.

The figure thus employed wore the famous hood of Captain Cobra, and the eyes beneath had a glitter which could not be misinterpreted.

Under the blaze of the bunched matches lay the giant form of Captain Thor, the great red beard spread over the ample chest and the large hands clinched as if in agony at his sides.

The eyes beneath the hood seemed to laugh, but the unseen lips sent forth no sounds of any kind.

The man with the iron knife was near the end of the game.

Consciousness came back to Rutherford of Santa Leo. He opened his eyes and found himself amid the glare of lights, which by and by revealed the heavy rafters of the Cold Deck Saloon.

In a little while the scene in the mine came back with startling vividness, and he felt the grip of the Mystery's hand once more at his throat.

He leaped from his chair, and with a choking thirst in his throat started toward the bar, watched by the bronzed men who filled the room like the spectators of a border court.

Not a word was spoken, and Captain Thor did not seem to fully realize the situation until he had drained the glass he had filled to the brim with the fieriest stuff to be had at the counter.

Then he turned and took in the scene that met his distended eyes.

He saw fifty faces he had seen before. He looked into the maliciously glittering eyes of Don Caddo, he saw the victory-pose of Major Midget, whose watchful cunning had destroyed the diabolical work of Caliban's box, and another glance revealed the placid countenance of Sam Shott, the nabob of nine mines.

If anything was wanting to determine what had brought about this startling change in his fortunes, he saw the hooded figure of his mortal foe.

Captain Cobra was the central figure of the whole scene.

The man of mystery who stood looking at the Red Cardinal with the eye of an eagle seemed to see nothing but the figure at the bar. With folded arms and head erect, he was firmly planted a few feet away gazed at by all who were not staring at Captain Thor and wondering how the scene would open.

The liquor which had burned its way down his parched throat, was not long sending its fumes to his brain.

All at once the giant of Santa Leo stepped like a lion to the middle of the room.

"I see by the scene around me that the

masked murderer of the mountains holds what is considered by him the best hand in the deck!" he exclaimed. "Captain Cobra still covers the face he has hidden from the sunlight while he has carried from shanty to shanty the iron blade of crime. I am ready to meet the man who has warned me with the dagger—who has struck down with the hand of the common murderer better and braver men than he."

There was no answer though every eye had been turned upon Captain Cobra.

Don Caddo looked with a sneer at his lips, and Major Midget's countenance told that the Red Cardinal's words if addressed to him would, despite the difference in stature, have sent him off in a flash.

"Is this a court?" suddenly continued Rutherford, looking round upon the silent crowd.

"If it is, Monte, the prosecutor of your Tribunal is not here," said Captain Cobra. "The lawyer bloodhound found the trail he went after, count; he came across his quarry when he was not expecting him. Monte won't be here to draw up another indictment."

"Which means that another victim has been added to the long list!" retorted Rutherford, and then, folding his arms in imitation of his enemy, he went on in mock heroic tones:

"Backed by the slaves of Captain Shott and strengthened by the friendship of the Cat from Carquinez, Captain Cobra finds himself ready to meet Rutherford of Santa Leo.

The eyes behind the hood seemed to get a sudden, resentful gleam, and one of Captain Cobra's hands touched the bottom of the dark cloth, where it rested on his breast below the chin.

The crowd held its breath.

It expected that the hood was about to be jerked off, revealing the long-hidden face of the mysterious captain; but it was not removed, though the hand which had been lifted was not taken away.

"Bring forward Dolores," spoke Captain Cobra, in tones which, though not loud, reached the Red Cardinal's ears.

It told him that the whole scheme had been nipped in the bud, that the girl had been rescued from the clutches of the Serpents, and that the exodus had been prevented during his absence from his band.

Several minutes elapsed after Captain Cobra's command, and then the crowd, parting at the door, revealed to the seeking eyes of the Red Cardinal the figure of the Angel of the camp.

Dolores came forward with her gaze fixed first upon Captain Thor, but it soon wandered to the man of mystery, and seemed to watch for a movement on his part.

"Behold the man of many names and countless crimes, Dolores!" suddenly exclaimed Captain Cobra, covering the giant in the middle of the room with his finger. "Look upon the man who, years ago in Shasta Land, wove the web of conspiracy around Colonel Midas, the nabob. Behold the outlaw who, when he had finished his work there, came south with his band of human wolves, and wrote a new record in blood on the sands of the border. Count Cactus, of infamous memory, stands before you, girl. Driven from the border by the united efforts of two governments, he comes to Santa Leo, finding here Madam Marcia enjoying the only years of peace she had known for a decade.

"Count Cactus becomes Captain Thor. Once more he plots for gold, and for something more precious still. Dolores, Captain Cobra told you among the mountains that the trail to the hand that took Madam Marcia's life was to be found in Santa Leo. As the avenging daughter of the woman more sinned against than sinning, behold the secret assassin, who, within the last few weeks, has taken two lives for gain and revenge. Madam Marcia, slain in the depths of her own mine in order to win the prize of the game he plays against Don Caddo yonder, and Durango Dan, killed for the purpose of condemning Captain Cobra by the packed Tribunal, bear down the scales of justice against that monster of to-day. Captain Cobra waives his rights to the vengeance before him. Take this, and settle the score. Keep your oath with Heaven, girl!"

For a moment the beautiful Angel of Santa Leo glared at the knife of iron that lay in Captain Cobra's palm; then she sprang forward and snatched it away with an exclamation of vengeance.

The next instant she went toward Captain Thor.

CHAPTER XXXVII. THE TURN OF THE LANE.

A BREATHLESS silence had taken possession of the interested crowd, and all saw that the gaze of the Red Cardinal was riveted upon the girl who, with the fatal iron blade in her clutch, had turned upon him, and even stepped forward.

"You can't reach his heart, child," suddenly called out a voice that filled the saloon. "Captain Thor is protected by one of Caliban's breast-plates!"

Dolores stopped and looked at the speaker. She saw the words quivering the lips of Don Caddo.

"Go on," commanded Captain Cobra. "The iron knife is invincible. Caliban's steel vest will never dull its point."

But the voices had broken the spell of vengeance which for a little time had held Dolores in its keeping.

She gave the Red Cardinal another look, caught his defiant eye and fell back.

"No!" exclaimed Dolores, retracing her steps. "Rather than stain my hands with the blood of the wretch, I'll leave him to the vengeance of God! His silence justly accuses him of Madam Marcia's murder. Captain Cobra, take back the iron knife. If its work is not done, finish the task yourself!"

Dolores extended the bloodless blade toward its owner, who took it from her hand and waved her aside.

"I have been accused of stealing upon men in the dark and sending this knife to their hearts," said he. "If the lips of the dead could part they would say Captain Cobra has been wrongfully accused. Heaven is my witness that the last meeting between us was fair. I have killed no man in cold blood. In the darkness of the cabins or among the mountains we have stood back to back on an equality, man to man, and similarly armed. Let it be so now!"

He looked at Rutherford, and caught in his eye a flash of approval.

Captain Cobra stepped forward.

"Remember the steel vest!" said the man from Carquinez again.

"Silence, coward!" barked the red rough turning upon Don Caddo. "Captain Cobra knows that I have no advantage over him. Whatever Caliban may have produced, I derive no benefits from it at this moment. Let every man look, and know that the Carquinez kitten has lied!"

A quick movement of Captain Thor's hands threw open the front of his dark shirt, and the next moment he was showing to one and all his broad, unclothed chest.

"Back to back, as you desire!" he continued, addressing Captain Cobra. "I trust to your honor that you do not wear the armor I wore when we met in the mine. Nay, I believe you," he went on, as the man of mystery put up his hands to expose his bosom. "You left me my knife, for which thanks. It is steel against iron, Captain Cobra."

A minute later, without any preliminaries, the enemies of a lifetime stood back to back in the center of the room.

No man had ever dreamed that they would meet there.

The red rough was the taller of the two. He eclipsed Captain Cobra's stature by almost a head, and the broad shoulders and red beard gave him the look of a giant of days long gone by.

It was speedily decided that the two duelists should remain in their singular position until Major Midget sent a pistol-ball into the roof overhead, when, wheeling about, they should step one pace apart, and then open the battle with the bowie, fighting until the feud between them was forever settled.

The little man stepped forward with a cocked revolver, and both Rutherford and Captain Cobra saw him direct it toward the rafter.

"Ready, gentlemen!" called out the major.

"Ready!" said the enemies at once.

"Then—here we go!" and the revolver was discharged, the heavy ball tearing its way through the wood between two shingles.

The next instant Captain Cobra and the red rough stepped apart and whirled at the same moment.

As this movement was executed the left hand of the man of mystery caught the dark hood and threw it to the floor.

A quick cry broke from Rutherford's lips, and he fell back, looking at the face so suddenly displayed.

"My God!" cried he. "The mummy of the Shasta Camp reassumed its living shape! Colonel Midas, you have been in league with Satan!"

A smile flitted over the handsome white face of Captain Cobra.

"Colonel Midas, am I?" he laughed. "Did you expect to escape the doom of the arch conspirator? Forward, Captain Thor! The long lane has turned at last. The man who went down into his mine in Shasta Land to be seized and walled up by your hands, stands before you once more as Colonel Midas, though as Captain Cobra he has made the iron blade famous among the hills of California. The mummy was in the cavern to which you consigned me. You found my ring on its finger when you brought it up to the light, and there was evidence enough to tell you and your band that Colonel Midas lay before you.

"Nor is that all," and Captain Cobra covered the Cardinal with his finger, while he took a step forward. "When, in after years, Count Cactus was engaged in plundering the rich ranches of the Southern border, a widow and her child fled in the night from his scoundrels. Neither had ever seen him; but his name was enough. The widow had been unfortunate. Her name had been connected with a crime of which she was wholly innocent, though the shadow of suspicion helped to blight her life. She came north with her child. They found an asylum

among strangers, and fate at last brought together Madam Marcia and Count Cactus, who once more had changed his name and calling. Ah! you recollect, Captain Thor. I see your fingers close anew about the hilt in your hand. The woman whose last days you imbittered by dark threats seems to touch the hand of Captain Cobra and her voice a this ear whispers: "Slay! slay the human tiger!"

"Stand ready then, for, by the one Eternal! this world is far too small to hold us both!"

For the second time the crowd looked at the foes, breathless and awe-stricken.

This time there was no signal, though Major Midget stood ready to repeat the shot he had lately given.

Captain Thor executed a quick, almost pantherish spring at the man of mystery. The men of the camp saw a big hand rise and fall, but they also saw that hand arrested in mid-air, and as the grip of Captain Cobra held the Colossus fast the terrible death-blade vanished!

Captain Cobra stepped back as the form of his enemy swayed, and almost before the heavy fall announced the end of the darkest career in California, he had thrown the dreaded iron dagger to the floor and turned toward the ashen face of Dolores.

"Immunity for the rest," said he, holding out his hands to the girl, who did not stir. "Captain Cobra this day passes from the stage. The robberies, the plots and the insults of the past have been avenged, and the hooded hunter of men will try to become the loving father of his only child!"

The astonished crowd looked on amazed. An oath dropped from Don Caddo's lips, and Captain Cobra, catching its hiss, left the girl he had just embraced to step toward the Cat from Carquinez.

"Thief!" cried he. "Were it not for the inward oath which has made me relinquish the iron knife forever, I'd pay you with its point for the plots and thefts of your career. You have lost the prize of your game, and before morning you shall depart with the Silver Serpents and share with them the fate that justice shall mete out to one and all. Silence! The portrait I recovered from you a few hours ago is all that keeps you from the cemetery on the mountain."

The morning's sun shone upon a scene it had never beheld in Santa Leo.

There was an absence of familiar faces, and a strange one had taken the place of many.

Captain Cobra—Colonel Midas once more, if you please, reader—sat in Sam Shott's office, with his hand on the page of the ledger to which the bonanza king had pasted the short title-deed of the nine mines.

"You wonder how I came to possess the bonanzas," said Colonel Midas.

"I have wondered a thousand times."

Colonel Midas smiled.

"In the hand of the unknown corpse which I found in the cavern to which Captain Thor and his conspirators consigned me, I discovered a diagram of a then strange region and coupled with it a gift to the finder of all the gold it contained. That region lies round about us; the diagram fits Santa Leo exactly. That is how the bonanzas came to be mine. They are still yours, Captain Sam. The bonanza I possess outweighs them all."

There came a time when the man of the iron blade—no longer a hooded mystery on horseback—gave the fairest, sweetest bride a miner ever won to Sam Shott, of Santa Leo, and who, when he had kissed the blushing girl, went down into the heart of a mine and stood a long time in silent communion beside the sealed tomb of Madam Marcia. For Colonel Midas had a wife while he was nabob of Shasta Land, though a quarrel had parted them, with all the fault on his side.

How he followed his foes with the iron knife from trail to trail, hiding his face year after year till the time for the unmasking came, the pages of our story have told in part.

We leave Captain Cobra here.

With the subsequent history of the Silver Serpents and Don Caddo until just vengeance overtook them, man after man, we have nothing to do.

The vultures of Cactus Land picked their bones; but, Major Midget remained in Santa Leo, and in time became the little Croesus of the Santa Barbara Hills.

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